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Summary

Summary: Synopsis

The play opens on a dark night at Elsinore Castle in Denmark. A couple of guards discuss an unsettling recent phenomenon: a ghost resembling Denmark’s newly deceased king has been regularly appearing outside the castle at night. Convinced that the appearance of a ghost means evil is afoot, the guards resolve to tell the late king’s son, Prince Hamlet, about the ghost of his father. Prince Hamlet has returned from his studies in Germany to attend his father’s funeral and to witness his mother’s remarriage to his uncle, Claudius, who has now assumed the throne. In addition to the recent upheavals within the royal family, Denmark is under threat from Fortinbras, the son of the late king of Norway. Unbeknownst to his uncle (the current king of Norway), young Fortinbras has been gathering troops to attack Denmark and reclaim the lands his father once lost.

One night, the ghost of the late king appears to Hamlet and reveals that his seemingly accidental death was actually a murder. The ghost tells him that the murderer was none other than Claudius, the king’s brother and Hamlet’s uncle. Disgusted by the thought that Claudius murdered his own brother before stealing his wife and his throne, Hamlet vows revenge. He decides to feign madness in order to investigate the matter further. Hamlet begins to act erratically, even toward Ophelia, a beautiful young noblewoman and the object of Hamlet’s affection. Ophelia’s father, Polonius, and her brother, Laertes, warn her to stay away from Hamlet, though Polonius believes that Hamlet’s recent madness must stem from his love for Ophelia.

Wanting to uncover the cause of Hamlet’s strange behavior, King Claudius and Queen Gertrude summon Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, Hamlet’s old school friends, to court. At Polonius’s suggestion, he and Claudius eavesdrop on a conversation between Hamlet and Ophelia to ascertain whether it is love that has altered Hamlet’s mental state. When this encounter proves inconclusive, Claudius decides to send Hamlet on a trip to England, and Polonius suggests that he attempt to eavesdrop yet again—this time on a conversation between Hamlet and his mother, Queen Gertrude. Meanwhile, inspired by the arrival of an acting troupe, Hamlet decides to have them perform a play that will mimic his father’s murder. Hamlet closely watches Claudius during the murder scene, and he interprets Claudius’s suspicious reaction as a confirmation of his guilt. After the play, Hamlet spies Claudius at prayer and realizes that this would be the perfect time to enact his revenge and kill him. However, he reasons that it would be too lenient to allow Claudius to go to heaven cleansed of his sins and decides that he should wait to act.

As Hamlet goes to meet his mother in her chambers, Polonius conceals himself behind a tapestry to listen in on their conversation. When Hamlet hears someone behind the tapestry, he thrusts his sword through it, killing Polonius. Desperate to maintain order, Claudius decides to send Hamlet (accompanied by Rosencrantz and Guildenstern) to England at once. In secret, Claudius drafts a letter to England, instructing that Hamlet be killed immediately upon arrival. Ophelia is driven mad by the loss of her father and ultimately drowns after falling into a brook. En route to England, Hamlet discovers Claudius’s treacherous plot and manages to return to Denmark. Enraged by the untimely deaths of his father and sister, young Laertes returns to court, and Claudius persuades Laertes to help get rid of Hamlet once and for all.

When Hamlet returns to Elsinore, Claudius arranges a public fencing match between Hamlet and Laertes. Unbeknownst to Hamlet, Laertes’s fencing sword has been secretly sharpened and poisoned, ensuring that even the smallest nick will kill Hamlet. As a backup plan, Claudius has also poisoned a cup of wine to offer Hamlet should Laertes fail to wound him. During the duel, Gertrude accidentally drinks the poisoned wine intended for Hamlet. Laertes wounds Hamlet with the poisoned sword and is, in turn, wounded with it himself in the ensuing scuffle. When Gertrude suddenly drops dead from the poison, Laertes admits his and Claudius’s treacherous plot to Hamlet. Enraged, Hamlet kills Claudius by stabbing him with the poisoned
sword and forcing him to drink the remaining poisoned wine. Laertes dies after asking for Hamlet’s forgiveness. Beginning to succumb to the poison himself, Hamlet begs his friend Horatio to live and tell the world what has happened here. As young Fortinbras’s troops approach the castle, Hamlet says that Fortinbras should be made king. Hamlet dies just before Fortinbras enters the room, which is now littered with the bodies of the royal family. Horatio promises to explain the events that have led to this tragedy, and Fortinbras orders that Hamlet’s body be carried away with dignity.

Summary

There is little debate that Shakespeare is the greatest Renaissance tragedian, and that *King Lear* (pr. c. 1605-1606, pb. 1608) and *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark* are the best examples of his work in that genre. Since its first production at the beginning of the seventeenth century, *Hamlet* has been the subject of intense critical inquiry, and the figure of Hamlet has been among the most intensely studied of any of Shakespeare’s creations. Intellectual, self-reflective, alienated, and seemingly paralyzed by doubts about both himself and the circumstance in which he is called upon to act as an agent of revenge, Hamlet has come to be considered the quintessential modern hero.

For the subject of his drama, Shakespeare turned to a story already popular in English theaters; at least two earlier productions of the sad tale of the Danish prince had appeared in London playhouses. In many ways, *Hamlet* is typical of a subgenre immensely popular in Shakespeare’s time: the revenge play. Most of these were bloody spectacles in which almost every character dies in the final act. The body-strewn stage in act 5 of *Hamlet* continues this tradition, as does the central action of the drama: the need for the young Hamlet to avenge the death of his father, the king, whose ghost informs Hamlet early in the play that he (the king) had been poisoned by Hamlet’s Uncle Claudius so Claudius could become king and marry Hamlet’s mother, the queen Gertrude.

The central dramatic interest in the play is the character of its hero. Hamlet sees himself as the “scourge and minister” of some higher order, returned from school in Germany to set right the disorder in his realm caused by his uncle’s murderous action. Unfortunately, the sensitive prince is not callous enough to ignore the doubts he has about the exact cause of his father’s death. He has been told by his father’s ghost that Claudius committed murder; other hints to that effect abound. The prince feels he must delay his revenge, however, until he is certain Claudius is guilty.

Compounding Hamlet’s problem is the fact that his mother, whom he loves dearly, has married his uncle soon after the old king has died. It is not at all clear to Hamlet whether his mother has had a hand in the murder, whether she is simply unaware of Claudius’s treachery, or whether she believes Claudius is innocent. Much is made of the mother-son relationship; Hamlet spends considerable time trying to convince his mother that she has made a mistake in marrying Claudius. Only when she finally comes to accept his view that the new king is somehow guilty does Hamlet decide to act. His decision is precipitated by several other actions as well, most notably the efforts of his supposed friends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to have him killed.

Many critics have observed that Hamlet is really too sensitive to effect the revenge that he intends. He is by nature melancholic, possessing a fatalistic disposition that borders on the suicidal. His most famous soliloquy focuses on the virtue of ending his life. “To be, or not to be,” he begins his musings; that is, indeed, a central question for him, since he sees little benefit in continuing to live in a world where injustice reigns. Nevertheless, he decides to act to avenge his father’s murder—once he is certain he knows who has been involved in the plot to kill him. Viewing the world as a place where things are seldom as they seem, he spends a good portion of his time trying to sort appearance from reality. He invents various devices to help illuminate the truth, such as his elaborate arrangement for a dumb show that will re-create the murder of his father in the presence of Claudius to try to make the king reveal his guilt. Hamlet is not satisfied simply to take vengeance
on his uncle clandestinely; he wants Claudius to admit his guilt.

For centuries, scholars have debated Hamlet’s inability to act even when he has the opportunity to do so. Early in the play, his inactivity can be attributed to his lack of assurance that Claudius is guilty. Were he to kill the new king without justification, he would be seen as no better than a murderer himself, and no good would come of his action. Nevertheless, when he does appear to have sufficient evidence of Claudius’s role in his father’s murder, the prince still seems paralyzed. In a crucial scene after Claudius has seen the dumb show and left the room visibly upset, Hamlet finds his uncle praying in the castle’s chapel. It is a perfect chance to slay the king, but Hamlet refrains because he says he does not want to send his uncle’s soul to heaven. Such casuistry has been reason for several critics to claim that Shakespeare is simply drawing out the drama until the final catastrophe. By the final act, Hamlet has become totally fatalistic. Having killed Polonius accidentally, he has already bloodied his hands; he accepts the challenge of Polonius’s son, Laertes, with resignation, knowing that he will probably be killed himself. In the final scene, all of the principals meet their end—and almost all by some mischance of fate. Despite the resounding encomium pronounced over the body of the slain prince, the bleak ending offers little encouragement for an audience who has witnessed this great tragedy. Surprisingly, however, the ending seems justified, in that order has been restored to the Danish kingdom, although won at a terrible price. Such is the lesson of most great tragedies, and Hamlet ranks with the very best examples of the genre.
Act and Scene Summaries

Act and Scene Summaries: Act I, Scenes 1–2 Summary and Analysis

Act I, Scene 1:

The play opens at midnight in Denmark as two sentries, Francisco and Barnardo, stand guard over Elsinore Castle. Barnardo has come to relieve Francisco of his watch, but they cannot quite see one another in the dark, causing Barnardo to call out, “Who’s there?” Francisco recognizes Barnardo’s voice and says he is glad to be going to bed after a chilly and uneasy shift. Before Francisco leaves, the pair is joined by Marcellus (a fellow guard) and Horatio (Prince Hamlet’s friend from school). Francisco leaves, and Marcellus explains that he has brought Horatio with him to witness an apparition—one that Barnardo and Marcellus claim to have seen the past two nights. Horatio is skeptical, but he patiently listens to Barnardo’s recollection of how the apparition appeared the previous night. Barnardo is interrupted, however, by the appearance of a ghost bearing a strong resemblance to the deceased King Hamlet. Astounded and terrified, Horatio begins questioning the ghost, but it disappears without responding. A pale and trembling Horatio admits that the ghost is indeed real and remarks that it was wearing King Hamlet’s battle armor. Horatio concludes that the appearance of the ghost signifies that something terrible is about to happen in Denmark. He mentions that Fortinbras, the former king of Norway, once arrogantly challenged King Hamlet to a one-on-one duel. King Hamlet killed Fortinbras and (as per the terms of the duel) claimed some of Norway’s land. Now, the late Fortinbras’s headstrong son—also named Fortinbras—is recruiting men to reclaim the lands his father lost to Denmark. Barnardo and Horatio wonder whether the ghost’s appearance has something to do with this pending military conflict, and Horatio notes that similar omens have appeared before other terrible events, such as the assassination of Julius Caesar. Suddenly, the ghost reappears, and Horatio again tries to speak with it. The ghost disappears, however, when a rooster crows to signal the dawn. Horatio says they should tell young Prince Hamlet about the king’s ghost, believing that the ghost will agree to speak to his son.

Act I, Scene 2:

The next morning, the new king of Denmark, Claudius, addresses his Council, accompanied by his new wife, Gertrude. Claudius—who is Prince Hamlet’s uncle—announces that even though the grief over his brother’s recent death is still fresh, he decided to marry his dead brother’s wife and make her his queen. He describes this as a time of mixed emotions (“In equal scale weighing delight and dole”) and thanks the Council for their advice. Switching topics, Claudius reveals that young Fortinbras has been calling for Denmark to surrender the lands lost by his father, the elder Fortinbras. Claudius explains that he will be entrusting Voltemand and Cornelius, his ambassadors to Norway, with a letter for Norway’s current king (Fortinbras’s uncle). In the letter, Claudius will inform the old and bedridden king of Fortinbras’s recent aggression and ask him to rein in his nephew. After Voltemand and Cornelius leave, Laertes, the son of one of Claudius’s top advisors, asks for permission to return to France, having come to Denmark for Claudius’s coronation. After granting permission to Laertes, Claudius turns to his nephew, Prince Hamlet, and asks why Hamlet is still so obviously mourning his father. Queen Gertrude, Hamlet’s mother, urges Hamlet to “cast off” his sorrow, reminding him that everyone eventually dies. Hamlet replies that his grief runs so deep that his mournful appearance is but a poor reflection of his true sadness. Claudius steps in and tells Hamlet that while a son is expected to mourn his father to some extent, to mourn too much is stubborn, unreasonable, and unmanly. Claudius says he hopes Hamlet will shake off his grief and start to think of Claudius as a father, especially since Hamlet is next in line to take the throne. With this in mind, Claudius asks Hamlet not to return to school in Wittenburg, Germany. When Gertrude echoes her husband’s request for Hamlet to stay, he reluctantly agrees, and everyone exits.
except Hamlet.

Alone, Hamlet laments the fact that God has made suicide a sin, complaining that life feels cursed and pointless. He bemoans his mother’s decision to marry his uncle—a man Hamlet believes cannot compare to his father—so soon after King Hamlet’s death. Hamlet knows he mustn’t voice his disapproval, even though keeping quiet is breaking his heart. He is interrupted by the arrival of Horatio, Marcellus, and Barnardo, who have come to tell him about King Hamlet’s ghost. Surprised, Hamlet agrees to try to meet the ghost later that night. After they leave, Hamlet declares that the presence of his father’s ghost makes him suspect “foul play.”

**Analysis:**

The first two scenes of *Hamlet* help to develop the sense of unease and mystery that will pervade the rest of the play. We open on a dark, cold night—so dark, in fact, that Barnardo and Francisco cannot see one another. Protocol dictates that the guard on duty (Francisco) ask the relieving guard (Barnardo) to declare his identity. Barnardo’s breach of protocol in fearfully asking “Who’s there?” first bespeaks his nervous and uneasy state, suggesting from the very first line of the play that something is amiss in Elsinore. We soon learn that the guards are on edge for a very good reason: the ghost of the recently deceased King Hamlet has begun to regularly appear at midnight—a time that is often associated with the supernatural. Horatio confirms that the ghost is an omen of something terrible to come: “But in the gross and scope of my opinion, / This bodes some strange eruption to our state.” The unease brought about by King Hamlet’s ghost in many ways echoes the uncertainty brought on by the recent changes at court. We learn that King Hamlet’s brother, Claudius, has taken the throne and married his late brother’s wife and, in doing so, has seemingly upset the natural order of things. The ghost of King Hamlet acts as both a symbol and a symptom of this disruption, suggesting that more chaos will follow.

The opening scenes also set up two of the play’s key themes: appearance versus reality and deception. Claudius’s polished speech at the beginning of Scene 2 attempts to smooth over the major changes that have recently occurred in the royal family. Though Claudius claims to be grieving the death of his brother, his decision to almost immediately marry his brother’s wife is undeniably quite scandalous. Furthermore, Claudius callously insists that Hamlet’s “unmanly grief” over the recent death of his father is unreasonable—a fact that suggests that Claudius's own grief may not be sincere. Ultimately, Claudius's behavior leaves both Hamlet and the audience skeptical of his true motives.

The theme of appearance versus reality is underscored by Prince Hamlet’s behavior. While Claudius’s formal speech and superficially gracious language is meant to give the impression of a well-ordered court, Hamlet undermines Claudius’s dignified performance with double-entendre and sarcasm: “A little more than kin, and less than kind!” Indeed, we will frequently see Hamlet use sarcasm or satire to cut through the pretense and superficial pleasantries of others, as he does during the following exchange with his friend Horatio:

**HORATIO:**

My lord, I came to see your father's funeral.

**HAMLET:**

I prithee do not mock me, fellow student.

I think it was to see my mother's wedding.

**HORATIO:**
Indeed, my lord, it followed hard upon.

HAMLET:

Thrift, thrift, Horatio. The funeral baked meats

Did coldly furnish forth the marriage tables.

In these scenes, Hamlet demonstrates a remarkable sensitivity to false appearances. In response to his mother’s comments on his behavior, Hamlet affirms that he is truly grieving but also acknowledges that outward displays of sorrow such as weeping, sighing, or wearing black are a mere performance of grief that may or may not match what one truly feels inside. Incidentally, Hamlet is particularly critical of his mother, who he feels has acted falsely herself by seeming to worship King Hamlet one moment before immediately transferring her love to Claudius the next:

Must I remember? Why, she would hang on him

As if increase of appetite had grown

By what it fed on; and yet, within a month—

Let me not think on’t! Frailty, thy name is woman.

It is important to remember that Hamlet engages in deception as well. His soliloquy reveals that he strongly disapproves of his mother and uncle’s conduct, yet Hamlet knows that he must not reveal his true feelings: “But break, my heart, for I must hold my tongue.” Throughout the play, false appearances and deception will continue to dominate interactions at Elsinore Castle, and uncertainty over what is real will eventually consume Prince Hamlet and those around him.

Act and Scene Summaries: Act I, Scenes 3–5 Summary and Analysis

Act I, Scene 3:

The setting shifts to a room in Polonius’s house. Laertes is preparing to leave for France and is wishing his beautiful sister, Ophelia, farewell. He brings up Ophelia’s budding romance with Prince Hamlet and cautions her against pursuing the relationship further. Laertes reminds Ophelia that, as a prince, Hamlet’s will is not his own. While Hamlet may casually pursue a noblewoman like Ophelia, his marriage is a matter for the state. Given this reality, Laertes tells Ophelia that she must act cautiously and protect her virtue. Ophelia agrees to take this advice to heart, though she points out that Laertes has not exactly followed his own advice. Just then, Polonius enters and chastises Laertes for dawdling while the ship to France awaits. He then proceeds to impart several pieces of advice to Laertes. Polonius advises Laertes to think things through before acting, to remain faithful to his old friends while being wary of new friends, to listen to everyone’s opinions but keep his judgements to himself, to take care with his appearance, to neither borrow nor lend money, and, most importantly, to remain true to himself. Laertes departs after reminding Ophelia to remember his advice. Polonius enters and chastises Laertes for dawdling while the ship to France awaits. He then proceeds to impart several pieces of advice to Laertes. Polonius advises Laertes to think things through before acting, to remain faithful to his old friends while being wary of new friends, to listen to everyone’s opinions but keep his judgements to himself, to take care with his appearance, to neither borrow nor lend money, and, most importantly, to remain true to himself. Laertes departs after reminding Ophelia to remember his advice. Polonius asks Ophelia what Laertes told her, and she replies that he was giving her advice about Prince Hamlet. When questioned about the nature of her relationship with Hamlet, Ophelia admits that he has confessed his love for her. Agreeing with Laertes, Polonius tells his daughter not to take Hamlet’s words of love seriously and orders her to keep her distance. Ophelia dutifully agrees.
Act I, Scene 4:

Later that night, Hamlet, Horatio, and Marcellus stand outside the castle, waiting for the ghost to reappear. The men hear the sounds of trumpets and cannonfire, which Hamlet explains are from Claudius’s late-night carousing. Hamlet claims that this is a Danish custom that should be breached rather than observed, as it makes Denmark look foolish to other nations. Hamlet argues that just as the tiniest drop of evil can cast doubt on an otherwise-good character, Denmark’s many accomplishments are overshadowed by the perception that its nobles are drunkards. Suddenly, the ghost appears. Hamlet, unsure whether the ghost is friendly or malevolent, asks it to explain why it has come, and the ghostbeckons him away from Marcellus and Horatio. They urge Hamlet not to follow it for fear that it may harm him in some way. Hamlet decides to follow the ghost, claiming that he does not value his life and that the ghost cannot harm his immortal soul. After Hamlet and the ghost leave, Marcellus and Horatio decide to follow him.

Act I, Scene 5:

When Hamlet and the ghost are alone, the ghost finally speaks. Claiming to be the spirit of Hamlet’s father, the ghost says that he wants Hamlet to “revenge his foul and most unnatural murder.” The old king’s ghost reveals that he was not killed by a snake bite (as was reported) but by his brother, Claudius. Hamlet, his suspicions about Claudius confirmed, is appalled. The old king’s ghost tells Hamlet how Claudius secretly poured poison in his ear while he slept in the garden, stealing his life, his crown, and his wife. Killed before he had the chance to seek heavenly forgiveness, the old king is now being punished in the afterlife for his unresolved mortal sins. The ghost urges Hamlet to save Denmark from Claudius’s wickedness and corruption, though he requests that Hamlet spare the queen from his revenge, leaving her to the mercy of heaven and her own conscience. The ghost disappears as the new day dawns, and Hamlet vows to remember and obey the ghost’s orders.

Marcellus and Horatio catch up with Hamlet and ask him what happened, but Hamlet refuses to reveal what he learned. Hamlet makes Horatio and Marcellus promise to never reveal the events that transpired this night. They swear on Hamlet’s sword, promising to keep these events a secret as the ghost’s voice commands “Swear” from below their feet. Hamlet warns them that he may begin acting like a madman and makes them promise that, no matter how strangely he behaves, they will never give even an ambiguous hint as to his motives. They swear on his sword two more times, with the unseen ghost calling out “Swear” each time. Hamlet, Horatio, and Marcellus head back inside, and Hamlet laments his burdensome obligation to set things right.

Analysis:

These three scenes conclude Act I and set up the question that will drive the rest of the play’s conflict: what will Hamlet do now that he knows about his father’s murder? Scene 3 gives the audience a look at Polonius’s intimate family life—a sharp contrast to Hamlet’s own fractured family. While currents of suspicion and dislike run through Hamlet’s interactions with Gertrude and Claudius, a fairly close relationship is suggested between Polonius and his children. Polonius takes care to give Laertes fatherly—albeit clichéd—advice, illustrating the sort of affectionate father-son relationship that Hamlet has been deprived of. Both Laertes and Polonius urge Ophelia to step back from Hamlet’s advances, warning her that a casual romance will not hurt Hamlet but could ruin her reputation. While the advice is realistic, their counsel is quite belittling: “Affection? Pooh! You speak like a green girl, / Unsifted in such perilous circumstance.” Laertes in particular seems to undermine his message of chastity by graphically comparing the sexual act to a canker worm forcing its way into a rosebud. For her part, Ophelia is clever enough to recognize Laertes’s hypocrisy in advising her to remain chaste and protect her reputation:
Do not, as some ungracious pastors do,
Show me the steep and thorny way to heaven,
Whilst, like a puff’d and reckless libertine,
Himself the primrose path of dalliance treads
And recks not his own rede.

This cheeky response suggests that Ophelia is more intelligent than her brother and father give her credit for and indicates that she and Laertes are quite close. Though Polonius and Laertes’s approach toward Ophelia is undoubtedly problematic, it is a fairly accurate portrayal of Elizabethan gender roles. A noblewoman’s chastity and reputation would have been of the utmost importance to her family, as she would not be able to make a good marriage without these things intact. In the end, Ophelia dutifully agrees to obey her brother and father, demonstrating her essentially mellow and passive personality.

The theme of appearance versus reality reappears as Hamlet criticizes Claudius’s penchant for revelry, which he claims has made Denmark an international laughingstock and corrupted its otherwise noble reputation. Soon after, the reappearance of the ghost serves as a confirmation that something is indeed “rotten in the state of Denmark.” When Horatio and Marcellus express concern at Hamlet’s going off alone with the ghost, Hamlet replies that he does not care about his life, echoing his earlier statements about his desire to commit suicide. Despite his lack of fear, Hamlet is not actually sure whether the ghost is a “spirit of health or goblin damned.” As we will see, questions about the spiritual world and uncertainty over what happens to the immortal soul after death will continue to torment Hamlet as he attempts to seek revenge.

In Scene 5, the ghost of Hamlet’s father finally reveals the reason for his presence and, by urging Hamlet to “revenge his foul and most unnatural murder,” sets the primary plot of the play into motion. That Claudius killed his brother with poison only reinforces Hamlet’s conviction that Claudius himself is a toxic and corrupting influence—on both Queen Gertrude and Denmark itself. When Hamlet meets with Horatio and Marcellus after his encounter with the ghost, he warns them that he may begin to put on an “antic disposition,” indicating that his plan to feign madness is already forming. As the play continues, Hamlet will indeed begin acting like a madman. The questions that readers and audiences must grapple with are whether Hamlet, at some point, is no longer acting and has truly gone mad, and if so, when does this switch occur? Some scholars point to this very scene as the beginning of Hamlet’s descent into actual insanity, noting his agitated and frenzied behavior toward Marcellus and Horatio after his meeting with the ghost. Hamlet oddly refers to the ghost below their feet as “truepenny” and “old mole,” and his obviously erratic behavior leads Horatio to comment, “These are but wild and whirling words, my lord.” As we have already seen, Hamlet is a very sensitive and introspective person—a thinker rather than a doer. He himself suggests that it is not in his nature to seek a bloody revenge: “O cursed spite, / That ever I was born to set it right!” As the play progresses and the line between appearance and reality becomes more blurred, it will be left up to the audience to determine whether Hamlet is merely acting the part or whether the burden of revenge has truly driven Hamlet mad.

**Act and Scene Summaries: Act II, Scenes 1–2 Summary and Analysis**
Act II, Scene 1:

Act II opens as Polonius orders his servant Reynaldo to follow Laertes to Paris and seek out any Danes that may be acquainted with him. Wanting to keep tabs on Laertes’s behavior, Polonius suggests that Reynaldo spread false rumors about Laertes to see whether they are confirmed or denied by those who know him. After giving Reynaldo specific instructions on how to surreptitiously obtain information about Laertes, Polonius sends him on his way. After Reynaldo leaves, Ophelia enters, obviously upset. She tells her father that Prince Hamlet suddenly came into her room looking disheveled and wild. He grabbed her by the arm and let out a deep sigh before walking away without saying anything. Polonius says he was wrong to have thought that Hamlet’s interest in Ophelia was trifling and concludes that Hamlet’s feelings for Ophelia must have driven him to madness. Believing he knows the reason for Hamlet’s strange behavior, Polonius goes to tell the king.

Act II, Scene 2:

King Claudius and Queen Gertrude greet Hamlet’s old school friends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Increasingly distressed by Hamlet’s odd behavior, the king and queen have invited his friends to the castle in the hopes that they will be able to uncover the cause of Hamlet’s madness. As Rosencrantz and Guildenstern go off to find Hamlet, Polonius enters and announces that Voltemand and Cornelius have returned from Norway. He also informs the king and queen that he has discovered the reason for Hamlet’s strange behavior. Though Claudius is eager to hear more, Polonius convinces him to meet with the ambassadors first. Cornelius and Voltemand report that the old king of Norway had no knowledge of young Fortinbras’s plans to attack Denmark and, once informed, immediately put a stop to them. After vowing never to raise arms against Denmark again, young Fortinbras was given permission to use his forces to attack Poland instead of Denmark. For that purpose, the old king asks Claudius to allow Fortinbras’s army to pass through Denmark’s lands. Pleased with this outcome, Claudius dismisses Voltemand and Cornelius.

Polonius turns the conversation to Hamlet, and—despite saying “I will be brief”—he gives a long-winded, wordy introduction before finally revealing that he believes Hamlet’s feelings for Ophelia to be the source of his madness. As proof, Polonius produces a love letter that Hamlet sent to Ophelia. To test his theory, Polonius suggests that they send Ophelia to Hamlet and then spy on their conversation. The king agrees just as Hamlet enters, reading a book. (It is worth noting that some of Hamlet’s later speeches suggest that he may have heard Polonius’s plan to spy on him and Ophelia, and this scene is often staged in a way that suggests Hamlet overheard the conversation.) The king and queen exit, and Polonius goes to confront Hamlet. On the surface, Hamlet appears confused during his conversation with Polonius, apparently mistaking him for a “fishmonger”; however, his seemingly absurd statements hide a stinging assessment of Polonius’s character. Eventually, Polonius exits to make the arrangements for the meeting between Hamlet and Ophelia.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern enter and greet their friend. Hamlet is happy to see them but quickly realizes that they must have been summoned on Claudius’s orders. When he presses them, they admit that the king and queen did indeed send for them. Hamlet says that his depressed behavior is the reason they have been summoned, admitting that nothing delights him anymore. Rosencrantz informs Hamlet that an acting troupe is en route to the castle and laughs, saying that they will clearly receive a poor welcome from the depressed prince. As the trumpets sound the approach of the actors, Hamlet tells his friends that they are welcome at Elsinore, but he warns them that his mother and his uncle are mistaken about his madness, claiming enigmatically that he is only mad sometimes.

Polonius reenters to announce the arrival of the acting troupe. Hamlet asks them to show their talents by giving a speech. The first player recites a dramatic speech about the murder of Priam that pleases Hamlet and bores Polonius. As the actors follow Polonius out of the room, Hamlet takes one aside and, after requesting that they perform *The Murder of Gonzago*, asks whether they could add in several lines of his own devising.
The actor agrees, and Hamlet is left alone. In his second soliloquy of the play, Hamlet berates himself for his inaction. Comparing himself to the talented actor from earlier, he says that it is monstrous that an actor can summon such passion over an imaginary character, while he cannot seem to summon the same passion over an actual act of treachery. It is revealed that Hamlet intends to have the actors perform a scene mimicking his father’s murder for the court. By closely watching Claudius’s reaction during the play, Hamlet feels sure he will obtain proof of his uncle’s guilt.

Analysis:

Act II further develops the character of Polonius, who may be interpreted in a variety of ways. Polonius’s decision to pay Reynaldo to spy on his son emphasizes his controlling nature, which we first glimpsed in Act I. Here, Polonius may be seen as a sneaky manipulator or a foolish busybody—indeed, he has been portrayed as both by various productions. On one hand, Polonius’s willingness to spy on his son and his specific instructions to Reynaldo on how best to extract information from Laertes’s friends suggest that Polonius is quite a calculating man. We see further evidence of Polonius’s scheming when he proposes that the king and queen use Ophelia as bait and eavesdrop on her conversation with Hamlet. Polonius does not appear to consider how such an encounter will affect Ophelia, who has already clearly been traumatized by Hamlet’s erratic behavior. If we interpret Polonius as a shrewd manipulator, these scenes suggest that he values information and scheming more than the well-being of his children.

Alternatively, Polonius is easily interpreted as a bumbling fool. Indeed, his advice to Reynaldo does seem to suggest that Polonius is much less cunning and subtle than he thinks. Polonius is willing to spread false and potentially damaging rumors about his son just to find out whether or not Laertes is misbehaving—a plan that seems counterproductive at best. In Polonius’s conversation with his daughter, he immediately jumps to the simplistic conclusion that Hamlet must be mad with love for Ophelia—a conclusion that the audience knows is wrong. Furthermore, when Polonius attempts to convey his “discovery” to the king and queen, Gertrude is forced to interrupt his long, bombastic speech to tell him to get to the point: “More matter with less art.” During his later interactions with Hamlet, Polonius does not seem to pick up on Hamlet’s subtle verbal barbs, dismissing most of what Hamlet says as merely the ravings of a madman. Polonius also comically interrupts the player’s dramatic speech to complain that it is “too long,” suggesting that he is not cultured or intellectual like Hamlet.

These scenes also introduce us to the characters of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, who will always appear together. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are often treated like a single character, and even the king’s and queen’s respective goodbyes (“Thanks, Rosencrantz and gentle Guildenstern. / Thanks, Guildenstern and gentle Rosencrantz.”) seem to imply that differentiating between the two men is difficult and unnecessary. Though summoned by the king and queen to spy on Hamlet, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern prove inept, and Hamlet sees through their ploy almost immediately: “Were you not sent for?” Unlike Claudius, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern do not necessarily appear to have harmful intentions; rather, they are easily dominated, manipulated, and controlled by others, which we see first in their interactions with the king and then again as Hamlet easily deflects their attempts to question him and forces them to admit that they are acting on orders from the king.

Throughout Act II, we get a look at how Hamlet’s scheme of madness has progressed. Though some scholars argue that Hamlet is, by this point, already truly insane, the clever and sharp criticisms that lurk beneath his seemingly nonsensical speeches seem to suggest that he is still in command of his mind. When Hamlet calls Polonius a “fishmonger,” for example, it could be meant as a euphemism for “pimp”—perhaps in reference to Polonius’s plan to use his daughter to trick Hamlet. It could also be taken as a simple insult meant to insinuate that Polonius is of low stature. Convinced Hamlet is crazy, Polonius pays little attention to these remarks, giving Hamlet the opportunity to insult him to his face. Hamlet again shows clarity with the arrival of the
players, quickly coming up with a ploy to prove Claudius’s guilt. His plan with the play seems to indicate that Hamlet is either stalling for more time or is still unconvinced of Claudius’s guilt. After watching one of the players perform an especially dramatic speech, Hamlet disparages himself for not being able to muster up the same level of passion for his real-life revenge: “What would he do / Had he the motive and cue for passion / That I have?” Though he vows to do better, Hamlet’s painful awareness of his inability to take action will continue to be a source of major internal conflict for him throughout the play.

Act and Scene Summaries: Act III, Scenes 1–2 Summary and Analysis

Act III, Scene 1:

The scene opens as Claudius, Gertrude, Polonius, Ophelia, Rosencrantz, and Guildenstern discuss Hamlet’s madness. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern tell the king and queen that they have not been able to uncover the source of Hamlet’s troubles. However, they do report that Hamlet seemed pleased about the arrival of the acting troupe and its forthcoming performance. Gertrude exits as Claudius and Polonius prepare to spy on Hamlet and Ophelia. Telling Ophelia where to stand, they quickly hide as they hear Hamlet approaching. As he enters the room, Hamlet mulls aloud over the question of whether to commit suicide. He muses that the only reason people endure the burdens and suffering of life is that they fear the unknown of death. Acting on Claudius and Polonius’s orders, Ophelia interrupts Hamlet’s soliloquy and attempts to return some romantic gifts he once gave her. Hamlet denies ever having given Ophelia anything, erratically claiming that he loved her once before declaring that he never loved her at all. He then goes on to tell Ophelia that she should enter a nunnery rather than give birth to sinners. Increasingly agitated, Hamlet condemns marriage itself, saying that no more marriages should be allowed, before leaving the room. Alone, Ophelia laments the apparent loss of such a “noble mind,” and Claudius and Polonius come out of their hiding place. Claudius declares that Hamlet’s madness does not appear to be caused by love. Furthermore, he suspects that Hamlet is not simply insane, observing that Hamlet’s melancholy behavior seems to be the result of something weighing on his soul. Fearing that Hamlet might prove dangerous in his current condition, Claudius resolves to send him on an errand to England in the hope that travel will cure whatever ails him. Polonius thinks this is a good idea, though he still believes that Ophelia is the cause of Hamlet’s behavior. He suggests that Hamlet be sent to Gertrude after the play, proposing that he hide and eavesdrop on their conversation.

Act III, Scene 2:

Hamlet enters with the players, giving them advice on how best to deliver the extra lines he has added to their performance. Polonius, Rosencrantz, and Guildenstern enter the room and tell Hamlet that the king and queen have agreed to attend tonight’s performance. Hamlet asks them to go and urge the players to hurry up. The players exit. Hamlet calls out to Horatio, and Horatio enters. Hamlet asks his friend to carefully watch Claudius during the performance, saying that he will watch him as well so that they may compare notes afterward. Horatio agrees, saying that he will be sure to notice if Claudius reacts in a suspicious way. As people begin to arrive for the performance, Hamlet warns Horatio that he must start acting crazy. Indeed, Hamlet proceeds to respond nonsensically to Claudius’s questions and harass Ophelia with rude sexual puns.

The players enter and perform a brief, silent version of the play to follow (an old-fashioned kind of pantomime called a “dumbshow”). In the dumbshow, the players present a loving king and queen. While the player king sleeps in the garden, a man steals his crown, kisses it, and pours poison in the king’s ear. The player queen silently acts out her sorrow, but eventually, the poisoner succeeds in wooing the player queen. With the dumbshow over, the players then begin to perform the full play. Hamlet comments on the play as it unfolds, and when Claudius asks whether the plot of the play is offensive, Hamlet slyly replies that it will not
bother those with clear consciences. When the play gets to the part where the player king is poisoned in the ear, Claudius suddenly stands up and leaves, ending the performance early. After everyone is gone, Hamlet and Horatio confer and agree that Claudius’s behavior clearly indicates his guilt. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern enter and inform Hamlet that his mother wishes to speak with him. Once more, they try to persuade Hamlet to divulge the reason for his behavior, but Hamlet accuses them of trying to manipulate him. Polonius enters the room and reiterates the queen’s request to see Hamlet. Hamlet agrees to go and is soon left alone. Speaking aloud to himself, Hamlet decides that he must admonish his mother with his words only, resolving not to physically harm her.

Analysis:

These scenes contain Hamlet’s “To be, or not to be” soliloquy, arguably some of the most famous lines in all of Western literature. In this soliloquy, Hamlet reflects on the inherent unknowability of death as he ponders, yet again, the idea of suicide. Hamlet’s contemplative nature is on full display as he considers the merits of suicide from a philosophical, rather than personal, perspective. Without discussing his own reasons for considering suicide, Hamlet concludes that people only bear the torments and burdens of life because they fear the unknown of death. Hamlet argues that contemplation robs individuals of their boldness (“Thus conscience does make cowards of us all”), highlighting his capacity for introspection as he pinpoints his own greatest weakness.

While Hamlet seems remarkably lucid during his soliloquy, his subsequent conversation with Ophelia is much more confusing. Hamlet rudely tells Ophelia to “Get thee to a nunnery” (Elizabethan audiences would have recognized “nunnery” as a euphemism for “brothel”), building on his earlier suggestion that Polonius is a “fishmonger” (pimp) and insinuating that Ophelia, who Hamlet seems to know is acting on her father’s orders, is prostituting herself. While Hamlet frequently claims that he is merely acting the part of a madman, his criticism of Ophelia seems to stem from very real feelings of frustration toward women in general. The dual meaning of “nunnery” may suggest that Hamlet’s main complaint is against those who appear pious or good but are secretly sinful, and we frequently see him direct this particular criticism toward the women in his life. We have already seen Hamlet translate his complaint against his mother into disillusionment with women as a whole: “Frailty, thy name is woman.” A similar pattern emerges in Hamlet’s conversation with Ophelia as he eventually decries marriage itself, saying “wise men know / well enough what monsters you make of them.” Hamlet’s treatment of Ophelia only worsens, and his overtly sexual responses to her polite remarks during the play become increasingly inappropriate and even borderline cruel. Whether or not Hamlet ever truly loved Ophelia, it now appears that their romantic relationship is over, and his apparent frustration with women in general sets the stage for the forthcoming confrontation with his mother.

Hamlet’s use of the play shows us that just as Claudius is using Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to spy on Hamlet, Hamlet is surveilling Claudius. These competing schemes further contribute to the atmosphere of secrecy and deceit that has dominated the play thus far. Claudius’s extreme reaction to the poisoning scene in the play is, for Hamlet, a sure sign of his guilt. Horatio, too, now knows of Claudius’s treachery. Before he leaves to go to his mother, Hamlet notes that it is midnight (the “witching time”) and claims that he now feels empowered to act villainously: “Now I could drink hot blood / And do such bitter business as the day / Would quake to look on.” These lines give the audience a glimpse into Hamlet’s dark state of mind, foreshadowing the violence that is to come.

Act and Scene Summaries: Act III, Scenes 3–4 Summary and Analysis
Act III, Scene 3:

Claudius enters as he speaks with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Afraid that Hamlet might prove dangerous to him, Claudius informs Rosencrantz and Guildenstern that they will be sent to England along with Hamlet. Polonius enters and tells Claudius that Hamlet is on his way to Gertrude’s room. Polonius intends to hide himself behind a tapestry curtain, and he reiterates how important it is that someone other than Gertrude hear this conversation, as mothers cannot be impartial toward their children. After Polonius leaves, Claudius begins to speak aloud of his guilt over having murdered his brother. Though he yearns to cleanse himself of sin, he finds that his guilty conscience prevents him from praying. He wonders whether or not he would even be able to receive heavenly forgiveness, since he is still reaping the benefits of his sin. After an internal struggle, Claudius eventually manages to kneel in repentance. Unseen, Hamlet enters the room. Seeing Claudius kneeling, Hamlet draws his sword, declaring that this would be the perfect time to kill Claudius and avenge his father. Hamlet takes pause, however, when he sees that Claudius appears to be praying. Hamlet wonders whether killing Claudius while he is purging his sins might cause Claudius to go to heaven. Remembering how his own father was cruelly killed before he had the chance to repent for his sins, Hamlet decides that he should wait until Claudius sins again to kill him.

Act III, Scene 4:

As they wait for Hamlet to arrive, Polonius instructs Gertrude to sternly chastise Hamlet for his recent behavior. Gertrude agrees, and as Hamlet approaches, Polonius hides behind a tapestry. When Gertrude informs Hamlet that he has offended his father, he bluntly replies that she is the one who has offended his father. Hamlet forcefully tells his mother that she cannot leave until he shows her the reflection of her innermost self, causing her to cry out for help. Gertrude’s cries prompt Polonius to also yell for help from behind the tapestry. Hamlet thrusts his sword through the tapestry, suspecting the spy to be Claudius. When Hamlet sees Polonius’s dead body, he criticizes him for being foolish and meddlesome. Hamlet insists that his mother listen to what he has to say, though she bristles at his rudeness. He accuses her of committing a terrible act, and when she claims not to know what he is talking about, Hamlet produces two pictures—one of Claudius and one of his late father. Contrasting the two, Hamlet asks how she could have forgotten his good, noble father and married such a poisonous villain, declaring that lust must overrule all reason and virtue. Visibly upset, Gertrude begs Hamlet to stop, saying that he has forced her to recognize the blackness and guilt within her soul. Hamlet continues to berate his mother, however, until he is interrupted by the appearance of his father’s ghost. Unable to see the ghost, Gertrude sees Hamlet talking to nothing and assumes he’s mad. Hamlet believes that the ghost has come to scold him for taking too long to get revenge, but the ghost instructs him to comfort his mother, who is frightened and confused by Hamlet’s behavior. Gertrude insists that Hamlet is insane, but Hamlet urges her not to ease her conscience by pretending that it is madness, rather than her own sinful behavior, that makes him speak so. Hamlet encourages Gertrude to repent for her sins and counsels her to refuse Claudius’s advances in the future. After making his mother promise not to tell Claudius that his madness is fake, Hamlet tells her that he must soon leave for England with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, whom he trusts as much as a “fanged” snake. Aware that there is scheming afoot, Hamlet vows to come out on top. He then drags Polonius’s body out of the room, criticizing him yet again for being a foolish and pompous man.

Analysis:

Scene 3 gives us more insight into the character of Claudius. From his conversation with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, there can be little doubt that he sees Hamlet as a dangerous threat. However, Claudius is first and foremost a politician, and he recognizes that Hamlet’s popular appeal will make him difficult to dispatch. Alone, Claudius openly admits his guilt over the murder of his brother, comparing it to the biblical crimes of Cain: “It hath the primal eldest curse upon’t— / A brother’s murder!” Unwilling to give up Gertrude and the
crown (the spoils of his treachery), Claudius understands that while he may escape justice in the “corrupted currents of this world,” he will not be able to escape divine punishment. We see that Claudius is torn between his desire to repent for his sins and his certainty that they cannot be forgiven. In showing the audience how heavily guilt weighs upon Claudius, Shakespeare complicates his antagonist, making it clear that Claudius is not merely a one-dimensional villain but a nuanced and morally complex character.

When Hamlet spies Claudius (apparently) at prayer, he immediately sees this brief, unguarded moment as an opportunity to finally take his revenge. However, Hamlet’s revenge is once again delayed by his contemplative nature. Remembering that Claudius’s murder of King Hamlet forced the old king to go to the afterlife uncleansed of sin, Hamlet worries that Claudius may actually go to heaven if he is murdered in the very act of cleansing his soul. Hamlet’s decision to wait and kill Claudius when he is once more engaged in “some act / That has no relish of salvation in’t” highlights the theme of retributive justice that runs throughout the play. Hamlet wants Claudius to suffer just as much as his father has suffered. Of course, it is difficult to know whether Hamlet’s hesitancy here is really caused by his desire to punish Claudius to the fullest extent or whether it is just a tactic to delay a violent act that Hamlet truly does not want to commit. While Hamlet’s desire for evidence of Claudius’s guilt was understandable, Hamlet now seeks the answers to abstract and ultimately unanswerable questions about the nature of the soul and divine justice. Ultimately, the audience must decide whether they think Hamlet’s decision to spare Claudius in this moment stems from a desire for the perfect revenge or a reluctance to commit murder.

In Scene 4, we see that Hamlet’s desire for revenge has unexpectedly fueled another’s quest for revenge. By killing Polonius, Hamlet has robbed Laertes of a loving father—just as Claudius once did to Hamlet. For the first time, we see Hamlet act without thinking, but in his haste, he accidentally kills the wrong man. Though Hamlet’s immediate reaction to killing Polonius is quite callous, he later appears to regret his actions. This unexpected murder sets an intense and passionate tone for the rest of Hamlet and Gertrude’s conversation. Many scholars and productions of Hamlet interpret this tense scene between Hamlet and Gertrude from a Freudian perspective (this explains why this scene is often staged in a bedroom, though the stage directions indicate that it takes place in the queen’s “closet” or private rooms). It is somewhat unclear what Hamlet wants from Gertrude; does he want her to admit her wrongdoing, or is he simply venting his feelings at her? In any case, Gertrude’s confused response to Hamlet’s insinuation that Claudius killed his father serves as fairly concrete proof that she had no knowledge of Claudius’s treachery. Despite Gertrude’s apparent blamelessness, Hamlet continues to forcefully outline the faults in her behavior. Hamlet’s quite graphic references to sex (“In the rank sweat of an enseamed bed, / Stewed in corruption, honeying and making love”) have led many scholars to wonder whether Hamlet has an unconscious, incestual desire for his mother—what Freud called the “Oedipus Complex.” For her part, Gertrude is relatively passive in this scene, suggesting that she, like Ophelia, is at the mercy of the powerful men surrounding her. When the ghost reappears, he is visible only to Hamlet, though Marcellus, Horatio, and Barnardo were all able to see the ghost in Act I. Shakespeare’s decision here can be interpreted in a variety of ways: does Gertrude’s blindness to the ghost indicate her inability to see her own guilt? Is the ghost’s new invisibility to those other than Hamlet a sign that Hamlet has truly gone mad? Ultimately, Shakespeare leaves these questions open, allowing room for different interpretations.

**Act and Scene Summaries: Act IV, Scenes 1–4 Summary and Analysis**

**Act IV, Scene 1:**

Claudius, Rosencrantz, and Guildenstern all enter the queen’s room. Upset over her confrontation with Hamlet, Gertrude dismisses Rosencrantz and Guildenstern before explaining what happened. She claims that
Hamlet, in a fit of madness, thrust his sword through the tapestry and killed Polonius. Claudius remarks that it easily could have been him behind the tapestry and declares that Hamlet is a danger to them all. Aware that this is a delicate political situation, Claudius wonders how he can handle Polonius’s murder without being blamed for it. He decides that Hamlet must be sent to England at dawn, and he admits that it will take all his skills to smooth over Polonius’s death. He calls Rosencrantz and Guildenstern back, ordering them to find Hamlet and take Polonius’s body to the chapel.

Act IV, Scene 2:

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern find Hamlet just after he has disposed of Polonius's body. When they ask where the body is, Hamlet refuses to tell them. Hamlet accuses Rosencrantz of being “a sponge” who soaks up the king’s favor, power, and rewards. He also warns that when the king needs the information Rosencrantz has gleaned, he will squeeze it out of him. Rosencrantz doesn’t understand what Hamlet is saying, and he insists that Hamlet must tell them where Polonius’s body is and then accompany them to the king. Ignoring the first request, Hamlet instructs them to bring him to Claudius.

Act IV, Scene 3:

Claudius enters with some of his lords, explaining that he has sent people to find Hamlet and the body. He says that Hamlet is too dangerous to be allowed to walk freely, but he admits that the situation is complicated by Hamlet’s popularity among the people of Denmark. To keep the situation under control, Claudius reasons that the decision to send Hamlet away cannot appear to be rash. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern arrive with Hamlet, who is under guard. When Claudius demands to know where the body is, Hamlet archly replies that Polonius is “at supper” with the worms. Hamlet suggests that Claudius may send a messenger to search for Polonius in heaven or go search for him in hell himself. Eventually, Hamlet hints that Polonius’s body is near the castle lobby, and Claudius sends attendants to go search there. Claudius then informs Hamlet that, for his own safety, he will be sent to England immediately. Hamlet agrees and says goodbye. After sending everyone away, Claudius speaks aloud of his hope that England will not disregard the secret orders he is sending with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern—orders that call for Hamlet to be executed immediately upon arrival.

Act IV, Scene 4:

Nearby, Fortinbras sends his Captain to Elsinore Castle to ensure safe passage through Denmark for his troops. Hamlet, Rosencrantz, and Guildenstern encounter the Captain as they leave the castle for their ship. When Hamlet asks what Fortinbras is trying to accomplish with his army, the Captain replies that Fortinbras is going to war over a worthless piece of Polish land. Hamlet tells Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to ride ahead. Once he’s alone, he comments that events seem to be conspiring to speed up his revenge. Declaring that a man whose only purpose in life is to sleep and eat is nothing but an animal, Hamlet wonders why he still has not taken action against Claudius. Contrasting himself with young Fortinbras, Hamlet notes that Fortinbras is willing to bravely risk everything for a meaningless cause, while Hamlet cannot even bring himself to take revenge on his murdering, incestuous uncle. Taking inspiration from Fortinbras's boldness, Hamlet vows that his thoughts from this point onward will be worth nothing if they are not bloody.

Analysis:

Claudius’s role as the play’s villain is cemented in these four short scenes. His reaction to the news that Hamlet has killed Polonius emphasizes his scheming personality; tellingly, his first concern is not for Gertrude, who actually witnessed the murder, but for himself: “Oh heavy deed! / It had been so with us had we been there.” Claudius is upset by the murder only insofar as it might hurt him politically, for he worries that he will receive the blame: “Alas, how shall this bloody deed be answered? / It will be laid to us.”
Claudius further admits that it will take all his “majesty and skill” to escape being tainted by Polonius’s murder, demonstrating his sensitivity to the political ramifications of recent events. Viewing Hamlet as both a physical and political threat, Claudius is determined to get rid of him as soon as possible. His decision to have Hamlet killed in England demonstrates both a lack of moral integrity and a cunning political mind. Knowing that Hamlet is beloved by Gertrude and the people, Claudius cannot publicly arrest or kill him. Instead, Claudius comes up with a villainous plot to have Hamlet dispatched in secrecy, calling to mind the sneaky way in which Claudius murdered Hamlet’s father. While Act III showed the audience that Claudius does feel burdened by guilt, Act IV makes it clear that this will not stop him from committing further sins.

As Claudius sinks further and further into wickedness, Hamlet’s own moral integrity is now seriously in question. He self-righteously criticizes Rosencrantz and Guildenstern for soaking up the king’s favors like sponges: “Besides, to be demanded of a sponge—what replication / should be made by the son of a king?” By this point in the play, however, Hamlet’s own moral transgressions seem to far outweigh Rosencrantz and Guildenstern’s inept attempts to report on his behavior to Claudius. In addition to killing Polonius, Hamlet has emotionally tormented Gertrude and Ophelia, two women whom he previously claimed to care for. While these things were arguably done in the service of his revenge, Hamlet’s justification for his behavior is getting thinner and thinner; in fact, Hamlet now seems to have hurt nearly everyone but Claudius. At this juncture, it is difficult to know whether Hamlet truly feels burdened by guilt, and his flippant refusals to reveal what he has done with Polonius’s body further erode his claim to the moral high ground. As it is unclear whether Hamlet’s bizarre responses are a calculated act or real madness, it is difficult to determine whether Hamlet is merely being callous or whether his apparent indifference to murder is the result of a deteriorated mental state.

Hamlet’s soliloquy in Scene 4 echoes the earlier speech he gave after watching the player perform in Act II. Faced with another’s conviction and determination, Hamlet is once again forced to confront his own hesitancy and inaction. Throughout the play, young Fortinbras acts as a foil to Hamlet. Like Hamlet, Fortinbras has suffered the loss of a greatly admired father and now lives under the control of his uncle, the new king. Both Fortinbras and Hamlet have the capacity for great passion; however, Fortinbras is a man of action. Indeed, at the very outset of the play, Fortinbras is attempting to avenge his father by reclaiming some of Denmark’s lands. The hotheaded young Fortinbras does not even hesitate long enough to notify his king about his plan—a direct contrast to Hamlet’s seemingly endless contemplation. It is also worth considering the implications of Hamlet’s respect for Fortinbras’s actions. As the Captain explains, Fortinbras is going to war over a totally worthless piece of ground that will likely only be conquered after a great loss of life: “We go to gain a little patch of ground / That hath in it no profit but the name.” Hamlet’s admiration of Fortinbras’s pursuit of a goal—regardless of the collateral damage or the worthiness of the goal itself—suggests that Hamlet no longer cares who gets hurt in his quest for revenge. Indeed, Hamlet’s ominous vow that his thoughts moving forward will be “bloody or nothing worth” foreshadows the casualties of his revenge that are yet to come.

**Act and Scene Summaries: Act IV, Scenes 5–7 Summary and Analysis**

**Act IV Scene 5:**

Queen Gertrude, Horatio, and a Gentleman enter. On Horatio’s advice, Gertrude reluctantly agrees to speak with Ophelia, who has been requesting an audience with her. The Gentleman informs the queen that Ophelia’s condition is pitiful; she frequently mentions her father, but her words are jumbled and nonsensical. Ophelia walks in singing a song and is oblivious to the queen’s attempts to speak with her. When Claudius sees Ophelia’s deteriorated state, he orders that she be watched closely. Alone with Gertrude, Claudius laments all
the unfortunate things that have recently happened: Polonius has been killed, Hamlet has been sent away, the people are suspicious about the circumstances surrounding Polonius’s death, Ophelia has lost her mind, and Laertes has secretly returned from France—undoubtedly convinced that Claudius is to blame for his father’s death. A messenger then enters and informs the king and queen that an enraged Laertes has overcome Claudius’s soldiers and now approaches with a mob of rebels who call for Laertes to be king. Laertes suddenly bursts into the room and demands to know where his father is. Though Gertrude tries to restrain Laertes, Claudius tells her to let him go, claiming that a king is always protected by his divine right to rule. Claudius informs Laertes that Polonius is dead but insists that he had nothing to do with his death. Ophelia wanders into the room singing, and Laertes, incensed by the sight of her obvious insanity, vows revenge. Attempting to calm him down, Claudius tells Laertes to select the wisest of his friends to sit in judgment over the matter. He assures Laertes that if this friend judges him to be in any way guilty of Polonius’s murder, he will surrender both his life and his throne to Laertes. Somewhat mollified, Laertes brings up the hurried and undignified nature of Polonius’s burial, and the two men exit the stage discussing it.

**Act IV, Scene 6:**

Some sailors approach Horatio, claiming to have a letter for him. Horatio is surprised to see that the letter is from Hamlet. Hamlet explains that his ship to England was attacked by pirates, who have now returned him to Denmark. In his letter, Hamlet tells Horatio that the sailors also have letters for the king. He instructs Horatio to oversee the delivery of the letters and then come meet him as soon as possible afterward. Hamlet mentions that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are still headed for England and says that he has much to reveal about them.

**Act IV, Scene 7:**

Claudius and Laertes enter, discussing Polonius’s death. Laertes now agrees that Claudius is not at fault but wonders why he did not openly punish Hamlet. Claudius explains that he loves Gertrude and cannot bear to upset her by punishing her only son. He also says that it would be risky to publicly accuse Hamlet, since he is so well-loved by the people. Reflecting on all that he has lost as a result of Hamlet’s behavior, Laertes vows revenge. A messenger arrives, bringing Hamlet’s letters. Claudius is shocked to learn that Hamlet will be returning the next day, but Laertes is pleased to have the chance to kill his enemy so soon. Claudius admits to Laertes that he has been trying to come up with a way to dispose of Hamlet and make it look like an accident. He then mentions that Hamlet is quite envious of Laertes’s skill at swordsmanship. Claudius suggests arranging a duel between the two men, and he proposes that Laertes secretly use a sharpened fencing foil so that he may actually injure Hamlet. Laertes agrees and takes the plan even further, suggesting that he poison the blade of his sword so that even the tiniest nick will kill Hamlet. As a backup plan, Claudius decides that he will have a cup of poisoned wine on hand to offer to Hamlet should Laertes fail to wound him during the duel.

Gertrude then enters to tell Laertes of yet another tragedy: his sister, Ophelia, has drowned. Gertrude explains that Ophelia was leaning on the branches of a willow tree that stretched over the brook. As she tried to hang flower garlands from the tree, the branch snapped, and she tumbled into the water. Distraught with grief, Laertes quickly leaves the room. Fearing that this tragedy might reawaken Laertes’s newly calmed rage, Claudius tells Gertrude that they should follow Laertes.

**Analysis:**

These scenes reveal Ophelia’s tragic fate: she has been driven mad by the loss of her father and eventually dies as a result of her madness. Unlike Hamlet, Ophelia’s mental breakdown is neither pretense nor ambiguous. Throughout the play, Ophelia has been dominated by the male figures in her life: Hamlet, Polonius, and Laertes. Raised to be passive and obedient to men, Ophelia is seemingly unable to cope with the
loss of both her father and the object of her affection. Critics are quick to note that even Ophelia’s manner of death is passive. Rather than choosing to actively commit suicide, Ophelia simply lets the water pull her down: “Till that her garments, heavy with their drink, / Pulled the poor wretch from her melodious lay.”

Ophelia spends the play bereft of female influence and friendship. Her tragic end points to the impossibility of her social position: as an Elizabethan noblewoman, Ophelia must constantly navigate the contradictory expectations and assumptions of men. While her father believes that she must be innocent, naive, and pure, Hamlet sees Ophelia as an object of beauty, lust, and sexual desire. In their confrontation, Hamlet accuses her of being corrupted in sexual terms, likening her to a prostitute. Thus we see that Ophelia is caught between the irreconcilably different ways in which she is viewed by the men around her: she must be both an object of sensuality and an object of purity. The ambiguity of her position as a woman is captured in her brother’s advice in Act I. Laertes tells Ophelia that she must remain chaste and innocent, yet he sexualizes her with his suggestive language: “your chaste treasure open / To his unmastered importunity.” That Ophelia internalized these contradictory expectations in a harmful way is suggested by what she says in her mad state. She first alludes to an old folktale about a baker’s daughter who criticized her father for giving out a free loaf of bread and was turned into an owl as a punishment for her unkindness: “Well, God ‘eild you! They say the owl was a baker's daughter.” This particular allusion is reminiscent of both Ophelia’s reluctance to defy her father and her sadness in being forced to be unkind to Hamlet, suggesting that these events affected her very deeply. Ophelia goes on to sing a song about a girl who was tricked into giving up her virginity to a young man who then refused to marry her. This odd song implies that even madness has not freed Ophelia from notions of sex and purity, highlighting the fact that, just like the young girl in the song, Ophelia has been let down and betrayed by the men around her.

With Ophelia’s death and Hamlet’s departure, Claudius can no longer pretend that life at Elsinore Castle is orderly and calm. The theme of appearance versus reality reemerges as the currents of chaos and treachery that have long hidden underneath the surface burst into the open. We see the first open challenge to Claudius’s authority in the form of Laertes, who seeks revenge for his father’s death and his sister’s insanity. Like young Fortinbras, Laertes is a foil for Hamlet. Though both of them have lost a beloved father, Laertes literally charges the castle in his quest for vengeance—unlike Hamlet, whose meandering revenge quest is the very thing that has caused Laertes so much grief. Indeed, the contrast between Laertes and Hamlet is made directly when Laertes tells Claudius that he would cut Hamlet’s throat in church to get revenge for Polonius’s death, recalling the moment in Act III when Hamlet decides not to attack Claudius while he is at prayer. In these scenes, Claudius yet again proves himself to be a smooth politician as he manages to calm Laertes down and redirect his anger in a way that suits his own needs. With Hamlet on his way back to Elsinore, Claudius knows that he needs to dispatch him quickly and, true to form, comes up with a cunning and underhanded plot to bring about Hamlet’s death. By deciding to involve Laertes in the plot to kill Hamlet, Claudius has raised the stakes, ensuring that a confrontation between himself and Hamlet will be inevitable.

**Act and Scene Summaries: Act V, Scene 1 Summary and Analysis**

A gravedigger and a laborer enter and begin digging Ophelia’s grave. They discuss whether or not it is proper that Ophelia is getting a Christian burial given that she appears to have taken her own life (according to religious doctrine, those who commit suicide may not be afforded Christian burials). The laborer says that it’s a pity that the rich and powerful are forgiven for killing themselves, while their fellows Christians are not. The two men joke with one another as Hamlet and Horatio watch from a distance. Observing the gravedigger carelessly tossing skulls aside, Hamlet wonders who these skeletons were in life. Hamlet approaches the gravedigger and asks whose grave he is digging. The gravedigger cleverly trades words with Hamlet, first telling him that, as he is the one digging it, the grave is his own. He then says that the grave belongs to neither a man nor a woman, as men and women are living, and the grave is for a member of the dead. The
gravedigger, who does not recognize Hamlet, says that he has been working since Old Hamlet killed King Fortinbras thirty years ago—incidentally, the same day that Prince Hamlet was born. Hamlet asks how long dead bodies take to rot, and the gravedigger points out a nearby skull that is twenty-three years old, belonging to Yorick, the former king’s court jester. Recalling fond childhood memories of playing with Yorick, Hamlet is dismayed by the sight of his skull. This disturbing image prompts Hamlet to realize that all men must eventually die and turn to dust, and he speculates that even famous men such as Alexander the Great and Julius Caesar may eventually have ended up as clay used to plug up a barrel of beer or fill in a hole in a wall.

Just then, the queen and king enter, followed by a priest, Laertes, and Ophelia’s coffin. Hamlet and Horatio hide to watch the procession. Observing the “maimed” funeral rites, Hamlet tells Horatio that the high-ranking person in the coffin must have committed suicide. Laertes urges the priest to perform the complete burial ceremonies (which would include the singing of a funeral dirge) and is angered when the priest claims that he has already bent the rules for Ophelia’s burial and refuses to “profane the service of the dead” further by giving full funeral rites to someone who has killed themselves. Overhearing this exchange, Hamlet is shocked when he finally realizes that the person being buried is Ophelia. Full of anger and grief, Laertes jumps into Ophelia’s grave and tells those assembled to bury him with his beloved sister. Enraged by Laertes’s ostentatious show of grief, Hamlet comes out of hiding and, after briefly scuffling with Laertes, declares that he loved Ophelia more than “forty thousand brothers” ever could. The two young men are forcibly separated, and the king and queen urge Laertes to ignore Hamlet’s mad ravings about the things he would do for Ophelia, such as drink vinegar or eat a crocodile. Claudius asks Laertes to be patient, urging him to remember their plan for revenge.

Analysis:

The two peasants’ irreverent approach to death sharply contrasts with Hamlet’s serious and philosophical reflection on the subject. It is through the gravedigger and the laborer that we learn that Ophelia’s death can be—and likely has been—interpreted by the rest of the court as a suicide rather than an accident. Hamlet imagines a nearby skull to be the skull of a lawyer, wondering, “Where be his quiddities now, his quillets, his cases, his tenures, and his tricks?” In other words, Hamlet is dismayed by the thought that in death, the qualities that make one unique are lost. Hamlet expands upon this idea when he sees the skull of someone he truly did know—Yorick, the late court jester: “Where be your gibes / now, your gambols, your songs, your flashes of merriment, / that were wont to set the table on a roar?” Perhaps overcome by the physical evidence of death that surrounds him, Hamlet realizes that even the most noble and great men end up as nothing more than dust: “may not imagination trace the noble dust of Alexander till he / find it stopping a bung-hole?” This scene’s focus on the somber reality of death sets the stage for the series of deaths that will occur in the final scene of the play.

Hamlet’s reaction to the news that Ophelia is dead brings up several questions. Though Hamlet earlier seemed truly disgusted with Ophelia—and, indeed, with all women—he appears to be filled with genuine grief at the news of her passing, suggesting that perhaps he really did love her. However, the poignancy of Hamlet’s feelings is somewhat overshadowed by his actions in this scene as he rudely interrupts Ophelia’s funeral and fights with Laertes over who is moregrieved by her death: “Forty thousand brothers / Could not with all their quantity of love / Make up my sum.” While Hamlet’s sorrow may certainly be real, it is hypocritical to criticize Laertes’s ostentatious show of sadness right before making a scene himself. Hamlet also never considers his own role in Ophelia’s demise, making his behavior seem even more insensitive. For his part, Laertes is obviously distraught over Ophelia’s death, declaring that she will be a “minist’ring angel” compared to the priest who refuses to give her full burial rites. Some scholars have speculated that Laertes’s relationship with Ophelia has incestual undertones, in large part due to his frequent references to her virginity and his extreme reaction to her death. Indeed, Hamlet and Laertes’s oddy competitive argument over Ophelia’s coffin seems to lend credence to that interpretation. Ultimately, Hamlet’s outburst in this scene
highlights his tendencies toward egocentricity and arrogance. By simultaneously making Ophelia’s funeral about himself and discounting the legitimacy of others’ grief altogether, Hamlet leaves the audience with little sympathy for him.

Act and Scene Summaries: Act V, Scene 2 Summary and Analysis

Horatio and Hamlet enter as Hamlet explains how he returned to Denmark. Feeling uneasy on the ship to England, Hamlet stole the sealed documents that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern were delivering. Upon reading them, he discovered that Claudius had ordered his immediate execution. Hamlet replaced this document with a forged letter calling instead for the immediate execution of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Shortly after, Hamlet escaped with the pirates while Rosencrantz and Guildenstern unknowingly continued on to their deaths. He explains that he does not regret what will happen to them, because they chose to take Claudius’s side. Hamlet does, however, express regret over his earlier treatment of Laertes, explaining that he actually greatly sympathizes with Laertes’s grief and desire for revenge. Just then, Osric, a member of the court, enters. Osric comes across as a bumbling fool in his obvious attempts at flattery, saying one moment that it is very hot outside before immediately agreeing with Hamlet that it is actually cold. Osric tells Hamlet that the king has made a bet that Hamlet can beat Laertes in a fencing duel and wishes to know if Hamlet will agree to fight. Osric heaps extravagant praise upon Laertes’s skill, and Hamlet and Horatio are somewhat confused as to why Osric is going so far to praise Laertes. Hamlet agrees to duel Laertes, and Osric leaves. A lord enters and tells Hamlet that, if he is willing, everyone will come to the hall, and they will hold the duel immediately. Hamlet agrees.

As everyone assembles to watch the fencing match, Horatio warns Hamlet that he will probably lose. Though Hamlet is more optimistic about his chances, he admits that something feels amiss. Horatio urges him not to fight if he feels that something is wrong, but Hamlet says that they must leave it in the hands of fate. Hamlet shakes hands with Laertes and asks for his forgiveness, claiming that it was his madness, not him, that wronged Laertes. Laertes stiffly replies that he will accept Hamlet’s offer of love, though he will not grant him forgiveness until he has taken expert advice on the matter. Laertes and Hamlet choose their foils (swords that have dull edges and are meant to be used for sparring), and Laertes deliberately chooses the blade that has been secretly sharpened and poisoned. Claudius announces that if Hamlet gets the first or second hit, he will drink to Hamlet and throw a valuable “union” (a large pearl) into the cup, which he will then offer to Hamlet. Claudius intends to use this poisoned cup to kill Hamlet should Laertes fail to scratch him; however, there is some scholarly debate as to whether the pearl itself is poisoned or whether Claudius has already poisoned the cup, intending to merely pretend to drink from it before offering it to Hamlet.

The duel starts, and Hamlet gets the first hit. True to his word, the king drinks and offers the cup to Hamlet. Hamlet, however, says he will drink after another round. He hits Laertes a second time, and Gertrude takes the cup to drink to Hamlet’s good fortune. Claudius orders her not to drink, but Gertrude drinks the wine anyway. In an aside, Claudius declares that she has drunk from the poisoned cup but says it is too late to do anything about it now. Gertrude offers the cup to Hamlet, but he once more refuses to drink. The duel resumes, and Laertes mutters in an aside that it almost goes against his conscience to kill Hamlet in such an underhanded way. Laertes finally scratches Hamlet with his foil, and the two men begin to scuffle, accidentally swapping swords in the process. The king orders them to be separated as Hamlet strikes out, wounding Laertes with the poisoned sword. Suddenly, Queen Gertrude falls to the floor. Horatio notices that both Hamlet and Laertes are bleeding, and Laertes announces that he is “justly kill’d with my own treachery.” Hamlet looks to his mother, and though Claudius tries to pretend that she has merely fainted from the sight of blood, Gertrude warns Hamlet that her drink was poisoned just before she dies. Laertes admits that his sword was also poisoned and says that both he and Hamlet are now doomed to die, revealing Claudius as the mastermind behind everything. Enraged, Hamlet picks up the poisoned sword and stabs Claudius before forcing him to drink from
the cup of poisoned wine. Claudius dies, and Laertes forgives Hamlet, asking for Hamlet’s forgiveness in
return before dying as well. Knowing he only has a few moments left to live, Hamlet begs Horatio not to
commit suicide, urging him to live and tell the truth about what has happened.

The sound of cannons and an approaching army can be heard, and Osric enters to report that young Fortinbras
has returned successful from his battle in Poland and is firing a volley to greet the ambassadors from England.
Hamlet tells Horatio that he wishes Fortinbras to be the new king of Denmark before succumbing to the
poison and dying. Fortinbras enters the room with the English ambassadors. They are all shocked by the
gruesome scene before them, and the ambassadors lament that their news—that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern
have, per the king’s orders, been killed—arrives too late for Claudius to hear. Horatio promises to tell
everyone of the events that have led to this bloody scene, and Fortinbras indicates his willingness to take the
throne. Fortinbras orders Hamlet’s body to be carried off like a soldier’s, saying that he is certain Hamlet
would have proved to be a “most royal” king.

Analysis:

In this final scene, the tension and secrecy that have characterized the play break into open violence. The
scene opens as Hamlet reveals the grim fate awaiting Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Though Horatio wonders
whether Hamlet was overly harsh to condemn them to death, Hamlet shows no remorse, suggesting that
Hamlet may finally be done showing mercy to those who have wronged him. While he does not regret the
defaths of his former friends, Hamlet does express regret over his treatment of Laertes. Hamlet’s clear desire
for Laertes’s forgiveness marks a significant shift from his confrontational behavior at Ophelia’s funeral. It is
notable, however, that Hamlet blames the murder of Polonius on his madness: “Was’t Hamlet wronged
Laertes? Never Hamlet.” If we believe that Hamlet was—as he has often said—merely faking his madness,
then his claim that he is not responsible clearly rings false and suggests that Hamlet is merely trying to
absolve himself of (deserved) blame. If, however, we do not believe that Hamlet is or has always been in his
right mind, his apology brings up several important questions. How have Hamlet’s actions been affected by
his mental state throughout the play, and what, if any, amount of responsibility should he take for the deaths
of Polonius and Ophelia? Shakespeare offers no easy answers, and it is ultimately left up to each of us to form
our own opinions about Hamlet’s character. It is clear, however, that while Hamlet’s actions have
undoubtedly been a source of much grief, the blame for the spate of deaths that occur in the final moments of
the play is shared among many characters.

In the latter half of the scene, the duel between Hamlet and Laertes quickly devolves into a bloodbath.
Hamlet’s mother, the mistaken recipient of Claudius’s poison, drops dead, prompting Laertes to tell Hamlet
that their own deaths are imminent as well. With Claudius’s treachery exposed for all to see, Hamlet finally
takes his revenge and kills Claudius with both the poisoned sword and the poisoned wine. That Hamlet kills
Claudius with these objects is in itself significant in that it shows that Claudius was, both literally and
figuratively, killed by his own scheming and manipulation. Though Hamlet has spent the entire play waiting
to kill Claudius, the actual murder is quick and feels almost more like a response to the immediate chaotic
situation than the culmination of a long-sought revenge. Indeed, it is only after Claudius’s treachery is
publicly revealed and Gertrude is killed right before his eyes that Hamlet, who realizes that he, too, is about to
die, finally takes action. It is difficult to say whether or not Hamlet would have killed Claudius had the
circumstances been different, and ultimately that question is left up to the audience to answer.

The audience’s sympathy for Hamlet is restored in his final moments. Having both been destroyed by their
quests for revenge, Laertes and Hamlet forgive one another, achieving a sense of closure and, by exchanging
Christian forgiveness, lightening the weight of their sins. As he waits for death, Hamlet asks Horatio to tell his
story and preserve his reputation, reminding the audience of the complex chain of events that have led Hamlet
to where he is now. When he hears Fortinbras approaching, Hamlet welcomes rather than resents his rule,
freely giving him his support. Fortinbras’s ascendancy to power marks a shift from the chaos and dysfunction of Hamlet’s family, signaling the restoration of Denmark’s honor and the end of the toxic corruption of the court. With Hamlet and Laertes having avenged their respective fathers and Fortinbras having reclaimed the lands his father once lost, these three sons have, once and for all, ended a cycle of revenge that began with the previous generation.
Themes

Hamlet is often called an "Elizabethan revenge play", the theme of revenge against an evil usurper driving the plot forward as in earlier stage works by Shakespeare's contemporaries, Kyd and Marlowe, as well as by the French writer Belleforest (Histoires Tragiques, 1576). As in those works, a hero plays minister and scourge in avenging a moral injustice, an affront to both man and God. In this case, regicide (killing a king) is a particularly monstrous crime, and there is no doubt as to whose side our sympathies are disposed.

As in many revenge plays, and, in fact, several of Shakespeare's other tragedies (and histories), a corrupt act, the killing of a king, undermines order throughout the realm that resonates to high heaven. We learn that there is something "rotten" in Denmark after old Hamlet's death in the very first scene, as Horatio compares the natural and civil disorders that occurred in Rome at the time of Julius Caesar's assassination to the disease that afflicts Denmark. These themes and their figurative expression are common to the Elizabethan revenge play genre in which good must triumph over evil.

But Hamlet is far more than an outstanding example of the revenge play. It is, to begin, a tragedy in which the attainment of justice entails the avenging hero's death. It is in the first scene of Act III that Hamlet speaks a soliloquy that has become a verbal emblem for Shakespearean tragedy and a measure of its thematic depth.

To be, or not to be, that is the question:

Whether ’t is 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?

(III.i.55-59)

Two of the play's salient themes are interwoven here; human mortality or death and fortune or chance. On the level of plot action, Hamlet is an exceedingly mortal work: virtually all of the major characters—Hamlet, Claudius, Gertrude, Polonius, Ophelia, and Laertes—die from unnatural causes by the end of the play; the penultimate scene takes place in a cemetery. Death, decay, and the futility of life fill the spoken thoughts the Danish prince, and the appearance of Ur-Hamlet's tortured ghost leaves us with cold comfort about the afterlife. Shakespeare skillfully shows vitality being cut short and leading to a gruesome end. Thus, in the graveyard scene that opens Act V, Hamlet holds up the skull of a court jester he knew as a boy, and utters the lines,

Alas, poor Yorick! I knew him, Horatio: a fellow

of infinite jest, of most excellent fancy: he hath

borne me on his back a thousand times; and now,

how abhorred in my imagination it is!
Not only is death pervasive, its occurrence is a product of chance and circumstance. True, Hamlet anticipates his death, while Claudius and, perhaps, Laertes deserve theirs, but Polonius dies by accident as does the Queen, while Ophelia's suicide seems to be beyond her control. Life inevitably yields death and a wormy grave, and its occurrence cannot be foreseen or avoided.

As both a plot component and a central thematic cluster, madness and, with it, the line between reality and illusion are certainly prominent throughout Hamlet. The Prince feigns madness so well that we sometimes question his underlying sanity. Indeed, Hamlet himself harbors the fear that the ghost of his father may be an hallucination. Ophelia, of course, lapses into madness, sinking below the depths of a tragic tide of events into self-destructive melancholia. Reinforcing this, Shakespeare plays on the contrast between reality and illusion. This is most often brought out in contrasts between the "real" and the "seeming" kings of Denmark (see Hamlet's condemnation of Gertrude in Act III, scene iv). This notion of illusion is embodied in Ur-Hamlet's remarks about "my most seeming virtuous queen" (I.v) and in the "play-within-a-play" where mere illusion on the stage evokes the real emotion of guilt in Claudius, the "play" being the thing through which Hamlet "catches the conscience of the King" (II.ii).

Throughout Hamlet we encounter a great deal of wordplay, Shakespeare using a vast number of multivalent terms ranging from gross puns to highly-nuanced words that evoke a host of diverse associations and images. While Hamlet can tell this difference between a "hawk and a handsaw," the play challenges the assumption that language itself can convey human experience or hold stable meaning.

Lastly, Hamlet contains a great deal of sexual material and innuendo, one in which the charge of "incest" is openly uttered. The Freudian implications of Hamlet's "case" have been explored at length by literary critics and psychoanalysts alike (see Jones 1976). Without belaboring the point, some critics believe that illicit or unnatural sexual drives, particularly Hamlet's repressed desire to be the object of his mother's affection in place of his father, form a strong undercurrent in the text.

**Themes: Advanced Themes**

The most fundamental issue in Hamlet, one which opens the door to countless readings of the play, can be stated in one simple question: Why does Hamlet delay taking revenge on Claudius? While critics offer various answers to this question, their theories generally differ in two distinct ways: one group focuses on the inner workings of Hamlet's mind as the primary cause of his procrastination; the other stresses the external obstacles that prohibit the prince from carrying out his task. Critics who find the cause of Hamlet's delay in his internal meditations typically view the prince as a man of great moral integrity who is forced to commit an act that goes against his deepest principles. On numerous occasions, the prince tries to make sense of his moral dilemma through personal meditations, which Shakespeare presents as soliloquies (a soliloquy is a speech delivered while the speaker is alone and devised to inform the reader what the character is thinking or to provide essential information concerning other participants in the action). Another perspective of Hamlet's internal struggle suggests that the prince has become so disenchanted with life since his father's death that he has neither the desire nor the will to exact revenge. In addition, Hamlet has been shocked and appalled that in the midst of his grief Gertrude has yielded to Claudius's affections, marrying him only two months after her husband's funeral. To the prince, these events have degraded the Danish court to nothing more than "an unweeded garden, / That grows to seed; things rank and gross in nature / Possess it merely" (I.i.135-37). Hamlet's strongest impulse is to kill himself to avoid further debasement, and yet he fears the damning consequences of suicide. With such heavy matters weighing on his mind, the Ghost's call for revenge only complicates Hamlet's ability to make decisions, leading to many other interludes of self-questioning and prolonged inaction.
Critics who view Hamlet's hesitation as a result of external rather than internal obstacles often emphasize one point: the prince's difficulty in determining the difference between appearance and reality as a primary barrier that restricts him from taking action. For example, Hamlet questions whether the Ghost is really a benevolent spirit or a devil who tries to trick him into killing Claudius. In addition, the Ghost's accusations pose a very practical problem for Hamlet because Claudius does not at first seem to be a villainous murderer, but rather a competent and responsible monarch. As far as Hamlet is concerned, the king's only transgression is his hasty and incestuous marriage to Gertrude. Other impediments prohibit Hamlet from killing Claudius once he has convinced himself that the king is indeed guilty. The most obvious is that the monarch is almost always surrounded by guards. The one instance in which he is not protected occurs during the prayer scene (Act III, scene iii), where Hamlet hesitates killing Claudius for fear of sending his soul to heaven. The prince's inaction here is perhaps the most controversial aspect of his delay: critics who see Hamlet's procrastination as the result of an internal struggle maintain that this episode clearly demonstrates his inability to exact revenge; on the other hand, commentators who support the theory of external influences assert that the prince delays killing Claudius not only because he fears sending the king's soul to heaven but—more importantly—because he has not proven to anyone (except possibly Horatio) that his uncle is a murderer. If Hamlet is thus viewed as a victim of external influences, his internal meditations on his hesitation do not necessarily demonstrate his inability to act; rather, they reflect his need to vent his frustration through self-reproaches at the fact that he cannot find an adequate opportunity to avenge his father's murder.

Closely related to Hamlet's delay is the theme of revenge. The prince is not the only character preoccupied with revenge in Hamlet: Fortinbras bears a grudge against Denmark because King Hamlet killed his father, and Laertes—infligated by Polonius's murder—threatens to overthrow the Danish government before joining Claudius in a plot to murder the prince. Further, Hamlet belongs to the genre of the Revenge Tragedy. Revenge Tragedy is a dramatic form made popular on the English stage by Thomas Kyd, whose Spanish Tragedy is an early example of the type. Such plays call for the revenge of a father's death by a son, or vice versa; this act is usually directed by the ghost of the murdered man. Other devices found in Revenge Tragedies include hesitation by the hero, real or feigned madness, suicide, intrigue, and murders on stage. Some critics theorize that Shakespeare despised the Revenge Tragedy as a form whose conventions had become trite. Yet because revenge theater was immensely popular with Elizabethan audiences, the playwright had to follow certain guidelines to produce a financially successful play. As a result, Shakespeare modified the theatrical type by creating a double entendre (double meaning) in which he subtly denounced the banality of the Revenge Tragedy without denying his audience many of its popular components. Hamlet's distaste for revenge throughout the play therefore reflects Shakespeare's disgust with revenge theater, and yet the dramatist fulfilled the audience's expectations for a tragic conclusion.

Many different patterns of imagery give a visual dimension to the dramatic action of Hamlet. Perhaps the most striking imagery is that of bodily corruption and disease. Throughout the play, Hamlet is preoccupied with the degeneration of the Danish court and the foul implications of Claudius and Gertrude's incestuous relationship. Although images of corruption and disease run throughout the play, they are never associated with Hamlet himself; however, a sense of infection underscores Claudius's crime and Gertrude's sin. Further, the description of disease and corruption exceeds the visual dimension and operates on an olfactory level (relating to the sense of smell). Shakespeare offers a vivid depiction of decay and stench by employing imagery of cancerous infection, rotting flesh, and the sun as an agent of corruption. These rank odors highlight the cunning and lecherousness of Claudius's evil crime, which has poisoned the whole kingdom of Denmark. War imagery is another important visual pattern that frequently occurs in Hamlet. In fact, images of war occur more frequently than those of corruption and decay; their dramatic function is to underscore the notion that Hamlet and Claudius are in a duel to the death.
Characters

Hamlet

The title character of the play is riddled with conflict. This conflict begins in act 1, scene 5, when the ghost of his father shows up to demand that Hamlet avenge his death. Hamlet spends much of the play in inaction, trying at first to decide whether the ghost truly represents his father or if it is some act of the devil trying to force him to commit murder—and regicide, at that. Hamlet is finally convinced that Claudius, his uncle, has killed his father, but he still finds ways to delay actually avenging his father's death.

As he is plotting Claudius's death, Hamlet feigns madness to keep those who wish him harm (such as Polonius and King Claudius) off his trail—though some consider that the events of the play have truly driven him mad, which is a highly debated aspect of Hamlet's character. Hamlet's relationship with the women in his life deteriorates quickly; he drives Ophelia to suicide and tortures his mother with what he refers to as her "sinful" deeds, begging her to "confess [herself] to heaven; / Repent what's past; avoid what is to come"—which warns her of his impending plans toward her "incestuous" relationship.

Hamlet is intelligent and witty, often making remarks that amaze even long-winded Polonius, who cannot reconcile the image of the Hamlet who appears insane with the Hamlet who masterfully plays with words.

Ultimately, Hamlet doesn't strike King Claudius in revenge for his father but in revenge for Claudius's actions against Hamlet himself. After realizing that Claudius has poisoned the swords used in the fight and that he will die, Hamlet is finally moved to direct action against Claudius and stabs him with the same poisoned sword. Throughout the play, Hamlet is faced with various levels of emotional desertion from people he trusted previously: his mother, Rosencrantz and Gildenstern, Ophelia, and even his father. He dies nearly alone in the world, save for the lasting friendship of Horatio, and with the knowledge that he will never be king.

King Hamlet

The ghost of King Hamlet appears to Hamlet in act 1, scene 5 to say that Claudius, his brother, has murdered him—thus stealing his life, his crown, and his wife. He begs young Hamlet to avenge this deed by killing Claudius, but he commands that Gertrude not be harmed. This sets in motion the primary conflict of the play, throwing young Hamlet on a course toward murder and his own death.

Some believe that the ghost of King Hamlet is only a projection of Hamlet's grief and that he doesn't really exist at all. Though others claim to see him, it is only Hamlet who speaks to the ghost, and when Hamlet is passionately arguing with his mother in her room, only Hamlet can see this ghost. Whether real or imagined, Hamlet's life is forever changed by the interactions he has with the ghost of King Hamlet early in the play.
**Claudius**

Claudius has allegedly murdered his own brother by pouring poison in his ear; he then takes King Hamlet's crown, as well as his wife. Claudius is power-hungry and manipulative, exerting his influence on all around him to secure his spot on the throne. He is cunning enough to use the "unfortunate" loss of his brother as a point of unification for the Danish people, telling them that it is tragic that they "bear [their] hearts in grief and [their] whole kingdom / To be contracted in one brow of woe" and are thus solidified by the death of the king. Claudius plays Hamlet's former friends against him, further alienating his nephew (and now stepson), and uses Ophelia as a pawn in his match against Hamlet until she crumbles. Claudius shows no remorse for the damage his actions inflict, and even when Hamlet catches him in prayer, he acknowledges to himself that his prayers aren't sincere. Claudius is self-serving and self-protecting, not even making an effort to save Gertrude from drinking from the poisoned cup in the play's final scene.

**Gertrude**

Gertrude is Hamlet's mother and the queen of Denmark. She remains something of a mystery throughout the play, but she isn't portrayed as a woman of strength. She seems to follow the will of her husband, even when it's in direct conflict with the well-being of her own son. It isn't clear whether Gertrude was involved with Claudius before King Hamlet's death, and it isn't clear how much she knows (if anything) about the murder. When Hamlet comes to her chamber in anger, she tells him that he "has cleft [her] heart in twain." She is willing to use Ophelia as a spy of sorts against Hamlet, but then she appears at Ophelia's grave with flowers and declaring that she "hoped [Ophelia] shouldst have been my Hamlet's wife." Some stagings of the play have Gertrude emerge as a dynamic character in the final scene, drinking the poisoned cup in a clear effort to save her young son. In others, Gertrude remains vapid and shallow until the final drink.

**Ophelia**

Ophelia's desire to obey and please people is her undoing. She tries to trap Hamlet for the purposes of Polonius (her father) and Claudius. She listens to Hamlet's fickle proclamations of love and near hatred, even suffering through the speech in which he tells her that she should go live in a nunnery. She doesn't have any meaningful relationships with any other characters in the play who have her best interests in mind or her happiness as a concern. Ophelia's isolation and desperation to find peace lead her to suicide.

**Polonius**

Polonius is the father of Ophelia and Laertes, and he has more advice than seems possible, which he frequently shares (and at great length). He associates with Claudius in an effort to better his own station. Polonius is willing to sacrifice his own daughter's happiness and mental stability by asking her to spy on Hamlet and report back to him and Claudius; further, he makes no efforts to shield her from Hamlet's subsequent verbal lashings. Polonius doesn't generate any sympathy in the audience when Hamlet accidentally murders him—he is another self-serving character who hangs on Claudius's robes in order to find success.

**Laertes**

Laertes is often analyzed as one of Hamlet's foils. While young Hamlet stalls for several acts trying to decide whether or not to avenge his father's death, Laertes jumps into action. It is Hamlet who kills Laertes's father, and this sets in motion the events that will bring nearly everyone on the stage to his or her death. Laertes is passionate and quick to move, but he dies trying to avenge his father's death, too. It seems that no matter which path the characters take (waiting and thinking or jumping straight to revenge), the outcome of revenge
is fatal for all.

Horatio

Horatio is the only true friend Hamlet has in the play, and he supports Hamlet through each tragic turn. Hamlet trusts Horatio, confiding in him things that he confides to no one else. Horatio is there when Hamlet dies and is so upset that he wants to die, too. But Hamlet asks him to live and tell his story. It is Horatio who delivers the much-quoted line, uttered to Hamlet's body just after his death: "Good night, sweet prince, / And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest!" He goes on to meet with Fortinbras to explain the carnage that Fortinbras finds at the castle.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's personalities are difficult to separate, and the two function almost as one character. Claudius summons them to spy on their (former) good friend Hamlet, and they seem all too happy to comply. In a plot twist, Hamlet forges a letter for the pair to deliver; it actually instructs that both Rosencrantz and Gildenstern be killed immediately without even a chance to pray for penance. The two prove to be unfaithful friends, and this elicits little sympathy in most audiences, though some do question whether they deserve to die for their incompetencies.

List of Characters

Hamlet

Hamlet is the Prince of Denmark, the son of the recently deceased King Hamlet, and the protagonist of the play. He returns to Denmark from the University of Wittenberg in the wake of his father’s death. He is disgusted by his mother Gertrude’s marriage to his uncle Claudius, which happened very soon after his father’s death. Hamlet idolizes his father and, even before learning of his murder, mourns him in what others view as excessive. (Read extended character analysis for Hamlet.)

Claudius

Claudius is the newly crowned King of Denmark whose ascent to the throne follows the death of his brother, King Hamlet. He enters into an “o’erhasty” marriage with his former sister-in-law, Queen Gertrude, making him Hamlet’s stepfather. Claudius is the antagonist of the play, guilty of murdering King Hamlet. Prince Hamlet characterizes Claudius as a drunken, lecherous, and villainous man, calling him the “bloat king” and emphasizing his inferiority to King Hamlet. (Read extended character analysis for Claudius.)

Gertrude

Gertrude is the Queen of Denmark and Hamlet’s mother. Two months after the death of her first husband, King Hamlet, she marries his brother, Claudius. Her marriage is a source of bitterness for Prince Hamlet, who views her actions as morally corrupt and sinful since by Elizabethan standards, marrying one’s brother-in-law was considered incest. Gertrude seems to want what is best for her son, encouraging him to cheer up after his father’s death and trying to understand his apparent madness. (Read extended character analysis for Gertrude.)
Polonius

Polonius is King Claudius’s advisor and the father of Laertes and Ophelia. He is concerned with appearances, especially the reputations of his children. His fatherly advice is well-intentioned but also generic and hypocritical, filled with clichéd aphorisms and self-serving recommendations. He does not shy away from meddling directly in his children’s lives, commanding Ophelia to avoid Hamlet and sending Reynaldo to keep tabs on Laertes in France. (Read extended character analysis for Polonius.)

Ophelia

Ophelia is the daughter of Polonius, Laertes’s sister, and Hamlet’s former love-interest. Throughout the play, Ophelia is described as sweet and chaste, the ideal daughter who obeys her father’s wishes and follows orders. However, after her rejection by Hamlet and the death of her father, Ophelia goes mad, ultimately drowning in what many suspect to be a suicide. (Read extended character analysis for Ophelia.)

Laertes

Laertes is Polonius’s son and Ophelia’s brother. He returns briefly to Elsinore for Claudius’s coronation before returning to France, where he allegedly indulges in unsavory behaviors. In contrast to Hamlet, who spends much of the play attempting to rationalize his revenge, Laertes establishes himself as a man who prefers brash action over careful planning. He is also shown to be corruptible, going along with Claudius’s underhanded plot to kill Hamlet. (Read extended character analysis for Laertes.)

The Ghost of King Hamlet

The Ghost of King Hamlet provides the inciting incident for the play by charging his son with the task of taking revenge on Claudius. The ghost tells Hamlet that he cannot move on to heaven until his “foul and most unnatural murder” is avenged. Hamlet is skeptical of the ghost at first, wondering whether it is truly the ghost of his father or an instrument of evil that has come to tempt him to commit sin. (Read extended character analysis for the Ghost of King Hamlet.)

Horatio

Horatio is Hamlet’s friend and serves as Hamlet’s confidante throughout the play. Unlike Rosencrantz, Guildenstern, and even Ophelia, Horatio is the one person who never betrays Hamlet. His loyalty is so strong that he even intends to take his own life so that he does not have to live without Hamlet. However, Hamlet prevents him from doing so, instead asking Horatio to remain alive so that he can tell the story of what happened and clear Hamlet’s “wounded name.” (Read extended character analysis for Horatio.)

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Danish courtiers whom Claudius tasks with spying on Hamlet. They reluctantly agree to do so, with the promised reward for their efforts being a “king’s favor.” Prior to the events of the play, they were good friends with Hamlet, of a similar age and disposition. However, Hamlet quickly discerns their involvement with Claudius and treats them both coldly. (Read extended character analysis for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern.)
Minor Characters

In addition to the characters above, Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* includes a supporting cast of minor roles. For more information about these characters, read more about them on their own page.

Characters: Hamlet

Extended Character Analysis

Hamlet is the Prince of Denmark, the son of the recently deceased King Hamlet, and the protagonist of the play. He returns to Denmark from the University of Wittenberg in the wake of his father’s death. He is disgusted by his mother Gertrude’s marriage to his uncle Claudius, which happened very soon after his father’s death. Hamlet idolizes his father and, even before learning of his murder, mourns him in what others view as excessive. He is educated, brooding, and prone to overthinking. He uses soliloquies to belittle other characters, express moral truths, externalize internal conflicts, and give readers a glimpse into his mind.

After returning home from university for his father’s funeral, Hamlet finds himself disgusted by the incestuous, by Elizabethan standards, marriage between his widowed mother and his uncle Claudius. He is openly hostile towards Claudius, constantly drawing comparisons between his uncle and his deceased father. When the ghost of his father appears and tells Hamlet to seek revenge, Hamlet is dismayed to hear about the murder but also admits to having suspected it. He vows to avenge his father, but he has some doubts about the veracity of the ghost’s claims.

In the process of trying to prove Claudius’s guilt, Hamlet ruins most of his relationships. Fearful that his plans might be exposed, he feigns madness in an effort to keep suspicion at bay. However, given that only Horatio understands his act, Hamlet is left without any other allies. Hamlet’s single-minded pursuit of revenge against Claudius leaves him disillusionsed with others. Ultimately he is betrayed, at least in his mind, by Gertrude, Ophelia, Rosencrantz, and Guildenstern. Hamlet views Claudius as such a villain that he is unable to trust anyone who might be associated with him. Instead, Hamlet ineffectually rants about the fickle nature of humans and bemoans his own cowardice at both exacting revenge and facing the unknowns of death.

Hamlet’s tragic flaw is his indecisiveness, which has spawned a number of theories about his inability to kill Claudius until the very last moment. One interpretation is that Hamlet has doubts about the veracity of the ghost’s claims—doubts which are often read as rooted in religious conflict. Though *Hamlet* is set prior to the Protestant Reformation, Elizabethan England was in the midst of the conflict between Catholicism and Protestantism. Hamlet himself questions whether the ghost is truly his father returned from Purgatory, as Catholic theology would suggest, or whether it is a devil in disguise, as Protestant theology would suggest. The point of the play within the play in act III, scene II is to prove Claudius’s guilt so that Hamlet can known for certain whether his revenge is justified. However, after getting the necessary proof, Hamlet is unable to exact his vengeance. In act III, scene III, he refuses to kill Claudius while the man prays so as not to send his soul to heaven. Hamlet’s refusal leads many to seek out alternative explanations for Hamlet’s inaction.

Another reading positions Hamlet as a morally conflicted character who is torn between two different callings. On the one hand, he has been tasked with exacting revenge for his father. On the other hand, Christianity, the dominant religion in 14th- and 15th-century Denmark, calls on its followers to avoid murder and revenge, instead leaving matters of justice to God’s judgement. By reading Hamlet’s conflict as religious in nature, his suicidal ideation stands out because Christian doctrine bars him from obtaining any form of relief. Not only can he not exact the revenge that he longs to, but he also cannot end his own life without barring himself from salvation.
By yet another reading, Hamlet’s isolation is to blame for his inaction. After learning that Claudius murdered King Hamlet, Hamlet is unable to trust anyone in the castle aside from Horatio, because he has no way of ascertaining who might betray him to Claudius. His isolation prevents him from acquiring allies or spreading the news of Claudius’s treachery. Just as he fears sending Claudius to heaven by killing him while he prays, Hamlet may also fear making a martyr of Claudius. Regicide is a serious crime, and if Hamlet were unable to prove that Claudius killed King Hamlet, then Hamlet himself could become an object of fear and animosity amongst the people of Denmark. This reading is supported by his insistence in act V, scene II that Horatio remain alive in order to clear his “wounded name,” something that the dying Hamlet will not have the chance to do.

Hamlet is an enigmatic character, alternatingly introspective and impulsive. He ultimately accomplishes what the ghost tasks him with, but at the cost of his own life and the lives of six others. Unlike most Elizabethan revenge tragedies, *Hamlet* does not end on a triumphant note. There is no final confrontation between Hamlet and Claudius, nor is there any sense of vindication for the ghost. Instead, Horatio is left to lament a senseless bloodbath. Revenge winds up feeling almost meaningless, accomplished as a final desperate act in the face of death. In the end, the cycle begins anew, as the vengeance-seeking Fortinbras arrives to claim Denmark as retribution for his own father’s death at the hands of King Hamlet.

**Characters: Claudius**

*Extended Character Analysis*

Claudius is the newly crowned King of Denmark whose ascent to the throne follows the death of his brother, King Hamlet. He enters into an “o’erhasty” marriage with his former sister-in-law, Queen Gertrude, making him Hamlet’s stepfather. Claudius is the antagonist of the play, guilty of murdering King Hamlet. Prince Hamlet characterizes Claudius as a drunken, lecherous, and villainous man, calling him the “bloat king” and emphasizing his inferiority to King Hamlet. However, Claudius is shown to be a capable ruler, beloved husband, and at least somewhat remorseful character, casting doubt on whether Hamlet’s judgements are entirely accurate.

Act I, scene II opens with Claudius addressing the Danish court. He is portrayed as a capable and confident monarch who has graciously stepped forward after the tragic death of his brother. Hamlet is the only character who seems to harbor any genuine distaste for Claudius, and even that reaction seems to stem more from his disgust with Gertrude and Claudius’s marriage than anything else. Claudius even expresses concern over Hamlet’s continued melancholy, urging him to cheer up. This is potentially a self-serving concern, as Hamlet’s gloom casts a shadow over what should be a joyous time for Claudius. However, Claudius, at least superficially, does all that he can to treat Hamlet as a dignified son, even naming him as the heir apparent to the throne. Further complicating Claudius’s character is his decision to allow Prince Hamlet to live in the first place. It is not until Prince Hamlet makes it clear that he is aware of Claudius’s role in King Hamlet’s death that Claudius turns his thoughts to assassination.

However, Claudius also establishes himself as an underhanded politician and unrepentant murderer. Though he does not immediately try to have Hamlet killed, he does resort to using Hamlet’s friends to spy on him. After the play within the play in act III, scene II reveals Claudius’s guilt, he goes to the chapel and attempts to pray. However, he is unable to seek salvation because, despite his guilt, he does not truly regret his actions. In Claudius’s mind, the ends have justified the means. His crown, his ambition, and his queen please him more than his sins disgust him.

The origins of the relationship between Gertrude and Claudius remain unclear, but for much of the play the pair seem to be a genuinely happy couple. However, their relationship is considered incestuous by Elizabethan
standards, since no distinction was made between relations by marriage and those by blood. The marriage is a
source of disgust for Hamlet and guilt for Gertrude, but Gertrude still jumps to Claudius’s defense, expressing
genuine affection. However, a different interpretation positions Gertrude as another means to an end for
Claudius, with her role as the “imperial jointress” being the true cause of Claudius’s attraction to her. By this
reading, Gertrude is a hapless victim of Claudius’s charms and Claudius is a ruthless politician who uses her
for his own ends.

Whether Claudius is truly the villainous figure Hamlet makes him out to be is left ambiguous, but his status as
a murderer is not. It is his “foul and unnatural” murder of King Hamlet that irrevocably establishes him as a
villain. There is ultimately no grand justification behind Claudius’s actions aside from ambition and earthly
gain. In a society where kings were considered to have a divine right to rule, Claudius went against the natural
order of the world. His unatoned murder of the king makes him morally inferior to Prince Hamlet, who has
been divinely sanctioned by the ghost of his father to restore proper hierarchical order and justice to
Denmark.

**Characters: Gertrude**

**Extended Character Analysis**

Gertrude is the Queen of Denmark and Hamlet’s mother. Two months after the death of her first husband,
King Hamlet, she marries his brother, Claudius. Her marriage is a source of bitterness for Prince Hamlet, who
views her actions as morally corrupt and sinful since by Elizabethan standards, marrying one’s brother-in-law
was considered incest. Gertrude seems to want what is best for her son, encouraging him to cheer up after his
father’s death and trying to understand his apparent madness. However, her relationship with Hamlet is
compromised by her marriage to Claudius and by her involvement in Claudius and Polonius’s duplicitous
schemes.

Gertrude is described primarily by the men around her, most notably Hamlet and Claudius. By contrast, she is
given very few opportunities to delineate her own thoughts and feelings. However, she does show moments of
wit and independent thought, such as when she says, “The lady doth protest too much, methinks,” in response
to being asked what she thinks of the Player Queen’s performance in act III, scene II. Her sarcastic response
indicates her belief that the play’s—and, by extension, Hamlet’s—views of love and marriage are impractical
and overly sentimental. She also displays moments of guilt regarding her marriage to Claudius, describing it
as “o’erhasty” and begging Hamlet to stop when he confronts her about it in her room. The Ghost tells Hamlet
to come between Gertrude and her “fighting soul,” implying that she is a conflicted character.

The nature of Gertrude’s conflict is one of the enduring critical debates surrounding *Hamlet*. The question
stands as to what role, if any, Gertrude played in the death of her first husband. By one reading, Gertrude is an
innocent and guileless woman who either married Claudius out of convenience or was seduced by him after
the death of King Hamlet. This interpretation positions Gertrude as a loving wife and mother who is simply
making the best of a bad situation. Furthermore, her role as the “imperial jointress” makes her a prime target
for an ambitious schemer like Claudius, suggesting that she may have been manipulated into the marriage.

However, Gertrude can also be read as an accomplice to Claudius, complicit in the murder of King Hamlet.
King Hamlet’s ghost implies that Gertrude may have been unfaithful even before his death, hinting that the
corruption in Denmark did not start with the murder of the king. This introduces the possibility that Gertrude
and Claudius were truly in love and that they killed King Hamlet to pave the way for their marriage. By this
reading, Gertrude and Claudius used her role as the “imperial jointress” to secure the crown and silence
objections to their union. However, if she is truly Claudius’s confidante and accomplice, her decision to drink
from the poisoned cup in act V, scene II raises questions. By one reading, Gertrude’s love for Hamlet
overcomes her love for Claudius, and she drinks from the cup in an attempt to prevent Hamlet from doing so. By another reading, Claudius knows that Gertrude does not have the heart to kill her son, so he intentionally excludes her from his plans to get rid of Hamlet, with tragic results.

Gertrude is a complicated figure, rendered even more ambiguously motivated by the lack of definitive details given about her character and her role in King Hamlet’s murder. Is she an innocent and naive woman caught up in Claudius’s ambitions? Is she a master manipulator who orchestrated the death of her husband in order to marry her lover? Or is she the product of a society where women have very little power, forced to make hard choices in order to secure her own future? The precise nature of Gertrude’s involvement in Claudius’s machinations remains a mystery, as does her moral compass, but her love for her son seems unquestionable.

**Characters: Polonius**

**Extended Character Analysis**

Polonius is King Claudius’s advisor and Ophelia and Laertes’s father. He is concerned with appearances, especially the reputations of his children. His fatherly advice is well-intentioned but also generic and hypocritical, filled with clichéd aphorisms and self-serving recommendations. He does not shy away from meddling directly in his children’s lives, commanding Ophelia to avoid Hamlet and sending Reynaldo to keep tabs on Laertes in France. As a royal advisor, Polonius’s tactics are underhanded and shady, which makes him the perfect ally for King Claudius as they attempt to assess the threat that Hamlet represents.

Despite Polonius’s attempts to play the spymaster, he fails to properly diagnose Hamlet’s madness or uncover Hamlet’s plans. He is also complicit in Hamlet’s isolation because he forces Ophelia to betray Hamlet’s affections by first rejecting him and then spying on him. Though Hamlet treats Ophelia poorly when she spies on him, Polonius continues to assume that Hamlet’s madness stems from Ophelia’s rejection, and he treats the prince’s apparent infatuation with his daughter as a source of pride. Hamlet sees through Polonius’s schemes and frequently antagonizes Polonius by insulting him or ridiculing his inferior wit. Polonius’s advice to Laertes is full of generic aphorisms, which characterizes Polonius as a self-important and long-winded courtier who is more interested in appearances than true substance. However, different interpretations lend different levels of depth and complexity to Polonius.

Whether or not Polonius was involved in the plot to kill King Hamlet is never made explicit. Instead, readers must interpret Polonius through two broad lenses: he is either complicit in regicide or an ignorant opportunist. By reading Polonius as an ignorant opportunist, his loyalty to Claudius is founded on respect for the crown and a desire to advance his own family. By this reading, he is a foolish character whose contrivances backfire in tragic fashion. However, it can also be argued that Polonius either knew of or at least suspected Claudius’s treachery. By this reading, Polonius is an astute politician and ruthless manipulator who betrays the former king in order to advance his own position. It also explains his conspiratorial relationship with Claudius, who goes out of his way to emphasize Polonius’s importance to the crown.

Polonius contributes to the thematic conflict between appearance and reality that permeates *Hamlet*. He comes across as a tedious and slow-witted man, but he is also an incredibly influential figure within the Danish court. His advice to his children is superficially sound and he seems to genuinely care about their well-being, but he also spies on them and uses Ophelia as a means of manipulating Hamlet. So duplicitous is Polonius that he poses a constant cipher to readers and audiences, who must discern the intentions behind his ornate words and postures.
Characters: Ophelia

Extended Character Analysis

Ophelia is Polonius’s daughter, Laertes’s sister, and Hamlet’s former love-interest. Throughout the play, Ophelia is described as sweet and chaste, the ideal daughter who obeys her father’s wishes and follows orders. However, after her rejection by Hamlet and the death of her father, Ophelia goes mad, ultimately drowning in what many suspect to be a suicide.

As Laertes departs for France, he warns Ophelia that Hamlet’s attentions may be fleeting—an intuition echoed by her father. They demand that Ophelia stop seeing Hamlet, reminding her that as a prince, Hamlet will not be able to marry her since she is below his station. Ophelia protests weakly, but ultimately bows to the wishes of her family and begins avoiding Hamlet. Ophelia’s obedience is often remarked upon as a positive character trait. However, it is her blind obedience to her father’s will that ultimately destroys her life. Rather than trusting her own instincts and continuing her courtship with Hamlet, she cuts him off, ultimately leading him to deny any former love he had for her.

As opposed to Laertes and Hamlet, who possess ample freedom, Ophelia’s life is dominated by the need to maintain the appearance of virtue and chastity. The male figures in her life police her sexuality and relationships, forcing her to live a life of isolation and self-denial. Much like Gertrude, Ophelia lacks true agency, instead being defined and confined by men. In Polonius’s eyes, Ophelia must be protected and preserved so that she can make an advantageous marriage. In Hamlet’s eyes, Ophelia is full of the same “frailty” that he charges all women with, a corrupting force that will betray him just as he believes his mother has betrayed him and his father. The only real choice Ophelia makes is to take her own life—and even the reality of that outcome is up for debate.

Ophelia’s character arc can be read in several different ways. By one reading, she is the ultimate victim, a chaste and innocent girl swept into madness by patriarchal abuse and self-denial. By this interpretation, the true tragedy of Ophelia is that she does nothing wrong. She does exactly what a woman was expected to do by listening to her father and preserving her virtue, only to end up mad once the structures of her life crumble. Ophelia’s apparent suicide is described as a passive affair, reminiscent of her docile obedience in life: she simply lets herself drown because she cannot function independently.

Ophelia’s character can also be viewed from a different angle. The songs Ophelia sings after going mad are full of innuendo and references to lost virtue. These songs open up the reading that Laertes and Polonius’s warnings about Hamlet came too late and that Ophelia is no longer as chaste as others claim. As she sings, Ophelia also passes out flowers, symbolically allowing herself to be “deflowered.” The interpretation that Ophelia is not as chaste as others think alters the meaning of her death. Rather than being the virtuous and passive sacrifice to a world that never taught her how to function independently, Ophelia’s tragedy becomes more personal. Ophelia is spurned by her lover and left without the protection of her father, her madness stemming from a combination of guilt, fear, and the knowledge that her act of agency and willfulness has ruined her in society's eyes.

Regardless of how one reads Ophelia, her death stands as a testament to the double-standard present between men and women in her society. While Laertes is told “to thine own self be true,” Ophelia is treated as an object whose worth depends on her denying her own needs and desires. Even in death, Ophelia is treated as an object; Laertes and Hamlet compete over who loved her more, with neither man able to recognize the role he played in her tragedy.
Characters: Laertes

Extended Character Analysis

Laertes is Polonius’s son and Ophelia’s brother. He returns briefly to Elsinore for Claudius’s coronation before returning to France, where he allegedly indulges in unsavory behaviors. In contrast to Hamlet, who spends much of the play attempting to rationalize his revenge, Laertes establishes himself as a man who prefers brash action over careful planning. He is also shown to be corruptible, going along with Claudius’s underhanded plot to kill Hamlet. However, his actions clearly grate on his conscience, and as he dies, he reveals his account to Hamlet and petitions for a mutual reconciliation.

When talking to his sister Ophelia, Laertes plays the part of the concerned older brother, offering advice and discouraging her from pursuing a romance with Prince Hamlet. However, his own character is revealed to be less than virtuous when Ophelia tells him not to be hypocritical; he warns her away from Hamlet and yet indulges his own vices in France. Polonius seems aware of Laertes’s unsavory indulgences and lectures him about proper conduct before he departs, advising him about money, conversation, and proper attire.

As his father’s heir apparent, Laertes is tasked with maintaining appearances so as to not shame his family. In order to keep tabs on Laertes’s behavior, Polonius sends Reynaldo to spread false rumors about Laertes in order to discover his true conduct. However, despite his apparent inclination towards vice, Laertes proves to be a dutiful son and brother, returning immediately to avenge his father and support his sister. He is overwhelmed by grief upon seeing Ophelia’s madness, marking him as someone who genuinely cares about his family.

Laertes serves as a foil for Hamlet in that they are both faced with the murder of their respective fathers, but whereas Hamlet broods and plots, Laertes immediately begins to exact vengeance. However, their fates are ultimately similar, with each falling dead by the other’s hand due to Claudius and Laertes’s poisoning scheme. Hamlet grants absolution to Laertes for his death, recognizing a kindred spirit spurred to passionate action by the same circumstance that tormented Hamlet himself. Though Laertes is taken in by his passions and agrees to participate in Claudius’s underhanded plot, he is described as a “noble youth,” and his apparent hesitation during the fencing match aligns him more with Hamlet than Claudius.

The fact that both Laertes’s action and Hamlet’s inaction produce the same outcome suggests that rather than being a traditional revenge play, Hamlet is actually a critique of the concept of revenge. Laertes’s action is intentionally contrasted with Hamlet’s inaction in order to call into question whether the method matters when the goal is misguided. Laertes is cast in the role of the villain in Hamlet’s narrative, killing the protagonist of the play through underhanded means. However, Hamlet recognizes his own purpose within Laertes and realizes that he has played the villain in Laertes’s narrative. Revenge is rendered futile in that Hamlet’s quest results in the ruin of two otherwise “noble youths,” showcasing the cyclical nature of violence and vengeance.

Characters: The Ghost of King Hamlet

Extended Character Analysis

The Ghost of King Hamlet provides the inciting incident for the play by charging his son with the task of taking revenge on Claudius. The ghost tells Hamlet that he cannot move on to heaven until his “foul and most unnatural murder” is avenged. Hamlet is skeptical of the ghost at first, wondering whether it is truly the ghost of his father or an instrument of evil that has come to tempt him to commit sin. However, Hamlet already
loathes Claudius, so when he uncovers evidence of Claudius’s guilt, Hamlet believes the ghost and embarks on the course of revenge.

The nature of the ghost remains vague throughout the play, with different characters proposing different theories. Marcellus, Bernardo, and Horatio initially assume that, due to its armored guise, the ghost has appeared to warn them about an impending threat to Denmark. They clearly doubt its intentions, only reluctantly allowing Hamlet to be alone with it. Hamlet is also initially unsure whether the ghost is truly his father or a devil in disguise. A significant aspect of Hamlet’s indecision to immediately kill Claudius is his uncertainty about the ghost’s nature.

Several different theories have been proposed regarding the ghost. By one reading, the ghost can be read as the literal manifestation of the late King Hamlet. That other characters see the ghost and that Claudius admits to murdering King Hamlet support such a reading. Using this interpretation, Hamlet’s revenge is successful, and the play conforms to the traditional model of Elizabethan revenge plays.

By another reading, the ghost can be read as a devil who disguises himself as the dead king in order to trick Hamlet into committing murder. Hamlet himself speculates on this possibility, wavering in his resolve to take revenge on Claudius because he cannot bring himself to fully trust the ghost. By this reading, the genre of the Elizabethan revenge play is subverted and vengeance becomes the sin that Hamlet must resist. The tragic ending of Hamlet and the frequent image of hellfire that accompanies the ghost support this reading.

A third reading postulates that the ghost is a figment of Hamlet’s imagination and a symptom of his madness. Alternatively, the ghost can still be read as real, but its message to Hamlet is a fanciful product of Hamlet’s existing hatred for Claudius. That the ghost only ever speaks directly to Hamlet and that Gertrude cannot see the ghost when Hamlet speaks with it support this interpretation. By this reading, Hamlet’s grief over the loss of his father and his resentment towards Claudius and his mother manifest in the form of the ghost, giving Hamlet permission to lash out against his uncle.

The most consistent force in the ghost’s characterization is its advocacy for Gertrude. While it is verbally harsh towards her, it does not condemn her in the same way that it condemns Claudius. It also specifically asks Hamlet to help her see the error of her ways. The ghost’s apparent love for Gertrude supports a more literal reading of the ghost as King Hamlet in that Hamlet describes his parents’ relationship as a true romance.

**Characters: Horatio**

**Extended Character Analysis**

Horatio is Hamlet’s friend and serves as Hamlet’s confidante throughout the play. Unlike Rosencrantz, Guildenstern, and even Ophelia, Horatio is the one person who never betrays Hamlet. His loyalty is so strong that he even intends to take his own life so that he does not have to live without Hamlet. However, Hamlet prevents him from doing so, instead asking Horatio to remain alive so that he can tell the story of what happened and clear Hamlet’s “wounded name.” Scholars have drawn connections between Horatio’s name and the Latin word *orator*, which means “speaker,” viewing his name as appropriate given his role as the speaker of Hamlet’s story.

Throughout the play, Horatio is an outsider. His position within the court is never specified, and the *Dramatis Personae* refers to him simply as “friend of Hamlet.” He lives up to this title by taking risks to aid Hamlet’s plans and keeping Hamlet’s secrets. Hamlet expresses a deep admiration for Horatio, citing his good judgement and refusal to be “passions’ slave” as virtues. The stoic and unwavering Horatio serves as a
contrast to Hamlet, who is prone to being overcome by strong emotions. Horatio is also a philosopher and scholar, but unlike Hamlet he does not allow himself to dwell overlong on the ambiguities of life. Instead, he stays firmly grounded in reality, devoting himself to Hamlet’s cause without questioning the prince’s decisions.

Horatio’s rationality serves as a means of establishing whether certain elements of the play are reality or illusion. The guards initially call upon Horatio to witness the ghost, citing his status as a scholar. Horatio’s ability to see the ghost establishes the reality of its presence for readers. When Hamlet becomes unreliable in his apparent madness, Horatio remains a tether to reality, offering verification for what otherwise may come across as the ramblings of a madman. He helps Hamlet observe Claudius during the play and confirms his reaction, grounding Hamlet’s suspicions and the ghost’s claims in reality. His absence is notable during Hamlet’s confrontation with Gertrude in her closet, where Hamlet sees the ghost but Gertrude does not.

In addition to confirming the more supernatural elements of the play, Horatio also serves as a reminder that Hamlet’s madness, as least initially, is an act. Horatio is the only person that Hamlet reveals his plan to, and his refusal to decry Hamlet as a madman gives readers the option to view Hamlet’s madness as either fake or real. By one reading, Horatio’s loyalty overrides his rationality, and he fails to notice that Hamlet has genuinely gone mad. By another reading, Horatio is the only character who can truly see Hamlet as he is. By the end of the play, he is the only character left capable of dispelling all of the misunderstandings surrounding Hamlet’s story.

**Characters: Rosencrantz and Guildenstern**

**Extended Character Analysis**

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Danish courtiers whom Claudius tasks with spying on Hamlet. They reluctantly agree to do so, with the promised reward for their efforts being a “king’s favor.” Prior to the events of the play, they were good friends with Hamlet, of a similar age and disposition. However, Hamlet quickly discerns their involvement with Claudius and treats them both coldly.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern agree to help Claudius spy, but whether or not they truly betray Hamlet is ambiguous. In Hamlet’s eyes, the mere act of agreeing to report back to Claudius makes them guilty. Their refusal to directly respond to his questions about who sent them also serves to make them seem dishonest. However, they do not reveal to Claudius that Hamlet is aware of his spying, showing that they do hold some degree of loyalty towards their old friend. Their conversation with Hamlet is also full of innuendos and teasing jokes, offering a glimpse into what was once a lively and genuine friendship.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern seem genuinely shocked by Hamlet’s treatment of them at the end of act III, scene II, in which he is dismissive and impolite. However, rather than recognize the sense of betrayal that Hamlet feels, they instead buy into the narrative of madness that Claudius has spun and thus assume that Hamlet has become dangerously unhinged. In response, they support Claudius’s plan to remove Hamlet from Denmark and agree to escort him to England. It is unclear whether Rosencrantz and Guildenstern were aware that Claudius’s letter contained orders to have Hamlet executed. However, Hamlet views their possession of the letter as an admission of guilt and mercilessly sends them to their deaths.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern’s involvement speaks to Hamlet’s increasing isolation within the play. Rosencrantz even tells Hamlet that his unwillingness to trust others is restricting him. However, this comes across as disingenuous in the face of Rosencrantz’s role as a spy. Claudius’s decision to use Hamlet’s former friends against him is wise, because it isolates Hamlet from potential allies and supporters. Whether one reads Rosencrantz and Guildenstern as hapless courtiers who mindlessly obey their king or as ambitious...
backstabbers who sell out their friend for gold, their betrayal takes a serious toll on Hamlet. Unable to trust them and unaware that pirates will provide a means for him to return to Denmark, he sends them to their deaths rather than risk exposing his own plans. Their deaths are announced with little fanfare, just two more unwitting minions caught up in the complex web of deception surrounding Elsinore.

**Minor Characters: Fortinbras**

Fortinbras is the Prince of Norway, whose father was slain in battle by King Hamlet. His campaign to reclaim the lands that his father lost to Denmark after his death becomes one of the subplots of *Hamlet*. Fortinbras’s story reflects the idea of revenge as cyclical. Hamlet is inspired by Fortinbras’s tenacity and ambition as he watches Fortinbras’s army wage war over a relatively useless piece of land. This inspiration gives Hamlet the resolve to go through with killing Claudius. Fortinbras does not appear in-person until his army arrives in Denmark at the end of the play. Prior to dying, Hamlet remarks that Fortinbras will likely become the new monarch of Denmark and offers his blessing. Fortinbras successfully achieves his revenge by reclaiming the lands his father lost, but it is unclear whether his actions end the cycle of violence and revenge in Denmark.

**Minor Characters: Reynaldo**

Reynaldo is the servant that Polonius sends to France to spy on Laertes. Reynaldo questions Polonius’ intentions, but he ultimately goes along with his master’s bidding. Fundamentally, Reynaldo serves to highlight Polonius’s underhanded methods and Laertes’s unsavory behavior.

**Minor Characters: First Clown and Second Clown**

The clowns are gravediggers whom Hamlet encounters after returning from England. Hamlet asks the first clown whose grave he is digging, but he proceeds to talk circles around Hamlet. The first clown also offers an external perspective on the events of the play, as he relays the common opinion that Hamlet is mad and that he has gone to England to recover. However, he also exemplifies how little the problems of the monarchy matter to the common people by dismissing the situation as unimportant. His wit rivals Hamlet’s, leading Hamlet to exclaim that the gap between the wealthy and the poor is shrinking.

**Minor Characters: Osric**

Osric is a member of the Danish court. He is sent to fetch Hamlet and Horatio for the duel, at which time Hamlet mocks him. Osric represents the superficiality of the Danish nobility, a group who, Hamlet claims, buy their way into Claudius’s good graces because they crave power and influence. He speaks in flowery, elevated language and flatters those more powerful than he is.

**Minor Characters: Marcellus, Bernardo, and Francisco**

Marcellus, Bernardo, and Francisco are guards at Elsinore. They report their sightings of the ghost to Horatio, who is initially skeptical. However, once the ghost is verified, they agree to bring Prince Hamlet in to try to communicate with it. Marcellus and Bernardo are sworn to secrecy by Hamlet after he speaks with the ghost, while Francisco is not present during the encounter.
Minor Characters: Voltimand and Cornelius

Voltimand and Cornelius are Danish ambassadors sent to Norway by Claudius in act I, scene II. They return in act II, scene II, when Voltimand reports on their assignment. He does so directly and without pomp.

Minor Characters: The Players

The players are an acting troupe that comes to Elsinore after being driven out of town by the rising popularity of child-actors. This is often interpreted as commentary by Shakespeare on the increasing demand for younger actors in Elizabethan England. Within *Hamlet*, the players help Hamlet put on the play with which he hopes to prove Claudius’s guilt. The first player’s emotional reaction to a scene about Hecuba leads Hamlet to reflect bitterly on his own apparent lack of passion and resolve.
Analysis

Analysis

Historical Background

There is general agreement about the sources for Shakespeare’s Hamlet. About 400 years prior to the Elizabethan version, Saxo Grammaticus told a similar tale in his Historia Danica (c. 1200). About 15 years before Shakespeare’s version, François de Belleforest adopted the essential story in his Histoires Tragiques (1576), a popular collection of tales in French. Both of these sources survive as literary manuscripts.

However, most critics believe that another source, the so-called Ur-Hamlet, is the version most directly responsible for many of the elements which Shakespeare incorporated into his play. Although no written version of this precursor exists, and historians can only work backwards from documents which mention the Ur-Hamlet, it is believed that this play, probably written by Thomas Kyd, was acted in 1594 by the Lord Admiral’s Men and the Lord Chamberlain’s Men, the latter of which company Shakespeare belonged to.

While the earlier versions included similar elements to Shakespeare’s Hamlet (the hero’s love interest, fratricide, feigned madness, adultery, spies, and revenge), only Kyd’s version includes the Ghost who seeks revenge. In fact, Kyd’s famous play, The Spanish Tragedy, includes other elements which Shakespeare seems to have incorporated into Hamlet: “a procrastinating protagonist who berates himself for talking instead of acting and who dies as he achieves his revenge; … a play within a play, a heroine whose love is opposed by her family, and another woman who becomes insane and commits suicide” [Boyce, 238–39]. However, if Kyd did not author the Ur-Hamlet, both he and Shakespeare may have borrowed from this same “Ur-” source for their respective works.

There are other sources, both real and fictional, which may have contributed to Shakespeare’s version, including women who killed themselves for love (1577), and a barber who confessed (in 1538) to murdering an Italian duke by putting lotion in his ears. In the second instance, Gonzago was the name of the plotter, rather than of the victim, as in Shakespeare’s “mousetrap.”

Hamlet was most likely performed in 1600, almost exactly at the midpoint of his writing career, which had begun as early as 1588 with The Comedy of Errors, and ended as late as 1613 with Henry VIII. Shakespeare’s allusions to his Julius Caesar (1599) in Hamlet, and references by other playwrights in late 1600 (John Marston’s Antonio’s Revenge) place the performance of Hamlet fairly precisely. However, the Player’s dialogue with Hamlet about the child actors is a direct reference to actual competition between rival theater companies in the spring of 1601; perhaps this scene was added later, or perhaps Shakespeare used Marston’s play as a source rather than the other way around [Boyce, 239–40].

The first performance is held to be that of the Chamberlain’s Men, in 1600 or 1601. Shakespeare’s longtime theatrical associate, Richard Burbage, was the first Hamlet; tradition has it that Shakespeare himself played the Ghost in the original production.

The first publication of Hamlet was in 1603 in a quarto edition known as Q1, and generally regarded as reconstructed from actors’ memories who had performed in the play. In 1604, Q2 was published, most likely from Shakespeare’s own manuscript; however, passages were edited out of Q2 because they were politically sensitive or simply dated. Between 1611 and 1637, Q3, Q4, and Q5 were published as reprints of each foregoing edition.
The First Folio edition of Shakespeare’s plays (1623), known as F, contained *Hamlet* and seems to have used Q2 as its source. Significant differences include the restoration of the passages cut from Q2, the modernization of words thought by the editors to be out of date, and inclusion of some lines which seem to be actors’ ad libs rather than Shakespeare’s text. Modern editors usually use Q2 because it is closest to Shakespeare’s text, but also because it has the restored passages and other minor improvements [Boyce, 240].

*Hamlet* is regarded as one of Shakespeare’s finest tragedies, along with *Othello*, *King Lear*, and *Macbeth*, all of which followed in the next five or six years (along with four other major plays). Over the years it has been the most often performed of Shakespeare’s plays, and has been filmed at least 25 times and televised 5 times [Boyce, 241]. Most performances use an abridged text, since the original could take four to five hours. Beginning in 1775 with Sarah Siddons, women began playing the title role, including, in 1971, Judith Anderson at age 73 [Boyce, 240].

**Analysis: Places Discussed**

**Elsinore Castle**

Elsinore Castle. Thirteenth century Danish castle that is the site of the main action of the play. Elsinore is a real city in modern Denmark, where it is known as Helsingor in Danish. The official modern name of the castle is Kronborg. However, William Shakespeare was not interested in creating the historical Elsinore (a place he almost certainly never visited) but in creating a castle suitable for a play with themes dealing with treachery and revenge, a play in which it seems almost impossible for the revenging hero to know exactly what is true and what is not.

Significantly, all but two scenes of the play are set within the castle or on its battlements, and all the characters seem to live in the castle, at least temporarily. These include King Claudius and his wife, Hamlet’s mother, as well as the aged courtier Polonius and his daughter Ophelia. Prince Hamlet, like his counterpart, Laertes, was evidently away, living at his university town, until called home for his father’s funeral. Horatio, Rosencrantz, and Guildenstern, Hamlet’s school friends, seem to be long-term guests at the castle. Even the acting company that stages *The Mousetrap* is lodged there. The exception is the Norwegian Prince Fortinbras, who lives in his own country except when he is waging war on his neighbors.

From its opening, the play’s action involves spying, an activity well suited to the labyrinthine layout of an ancient building in which one room opens into another and passageways twist unpredictably, leading from royal audience rooms to chapels to private rooms or “closets.” In such a setting, audiences see Hamlet decide to adopt his disguise of an “antic disposition” in order to test the veracity of the ghost. In this setting Polonius asks a spy to observe his son’s behavior in Paris, Claudius and Polonius spy on Hamlet’s conversation with Ophelia, Claudius asks Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to spy on Hamlet, and Polonius is killed while spying on Hamlet and Gertrude. The fact that Claudius cannot find where Hamlet has hidden Polonius’s body—near the stairs to the “lobby”—suggests that the castle’s structure is as complicated as the play’s.

The task of the spy is always the same, to learn the truth, a problem central to *Hamlet*’s theme wherein truth is evasive and every answer seems to lead to more questions. The ghost’s truth-telling, Claudius’s guilt, Gertrude’s complicity, Hamlet’s unstable state of mind, and his apparent delaying are all subjects for questions in the course of the play, and the answers they bring forth are as confusing as the setting in which they are asked.

**Exterior locations**
Exterior locations. *Hamlet* is an unusually interior play. Aside from its scenes on battlements, only two scenes seem to take place outdoors. One of those takes place on the Danish coast as Hamlet watches Fortinbras’s army march to make war on Poland. There Hamlet compares Fortinbras’s energetic action to his own proclivity for delaying action. Significantly, the other of the exterior scenes is set in a graveyard. There Hamlet seems to arrive at an answer which frees him to act out his revenge. As he watches preparations for Ophelia’s funeral, he concludes that even the greatest lives end in the grave, and soon after that he tells Horatio that he recognizes his own fatal destiny and is ready to sweep into his revenge.

**Battlements**

Battlements. Defensive structures around Elsinore’s walls that are the location of some of the play’s most gripping early action, as when the ghost of the dead king appears first to the watchmen and later to Hamlet. It is appropriate that the king, who appears in his armor, should want to walk on the structure that symbolizes his military power, the position from which he once defended Elsinore, since he is about to ask his son to undertake another sort of castle defense in avenging his death.

*Wittenberg*

Wittenberg. Location of the Germany university which Hamlet has attended. Wittenberg is closely associated with Martin Luther, whose studies there precipitated the Protestant Reformation in 1517. The university was still strongly associated with Protestantism in 1603, although Shakespeare never indicates that Hamlet is involved in any religious study. Wittenberg stands in strong contrast to Paris, where Polonius’s son Laertes has been studying and where Polonius suspects he may be overly involved in the city’s temptations to loose living.

*Denmark*

Denmark. General setting of the play. Shakespeare adopted the Danish setting along with the action of the play (which has its roots in thirteenth century Danish folklore) from a source almost contemporary to him; many scholars believe he used a version of the story written around 1589 by the English playwright Thomas Kyd. Shakespeare made no attempt to recreate early medieval Denmark; instead he set the action in a sort of timeless past. However, he included action and references that evoke the early modern period of 1600, when Denmark was an important naval power that competed with England and when both Paris and Wittenberg were significant educational centers. Hamlet’s references to the Danish court’s reputation for drunkenness must have amused Shakespeare’s audiences. Ironically, Shakespeare makes Claudius portray England as a state so eager to stay in the favor of powerful Denmark that its king will surely commit any political executions Claudius requests, including the execution of Hamlet.

**Analysis: Modern Connections**

Written at the outset of the seventeenth century and based on accounts of several centuries earlier, *Hamlet* is often regarded as remarkably modern in its treatment of themes concerning mental health, political health, and spiritual health.

Hamlet describes himself as afflicted with a melancholy, which he does not completely understand. English Renaissance audiences of *Hamlet* based their ideas about psychological disturbances such as melancholy and madness on medieval theories of body humours, or fluids. The humours correlated with the four basic elements of earth, air, fire, and water. The humours consisted of black bile, yellow bile, blood, and phlegm. A predominance of one of these humours resulted in a personality type. The person with an excess of blood was called sanguine, or cheerful. The excess of phlegm resulted in a phlegmatic, or passive, inert sort of person.
An excess of black bile resulted in melancholy, or sadness. An excess of yellow bile resulted in choler, or anger. Treatments for melancholy ranged from advice about types of clothing and colors to wear or avoid to settings for one’s house to types of food to eat or avoid. The early seventeenth-century work *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, by Robert Burton, contains a special section dealing with two difficult-to-treat types of melancholy, love melancholy and religious melancholy. Polonius is convinced that Hamlet suffers from love melancholy. Although Hamlet says he has lost his ability to enjoy his usual activities, several observers, including the king, express the opinion that Hamlet is not mad but brooding over something and thereby is dangerous.

Ophelia, by contrast, is assumed by all of her observers—the queen, the king, Horatio, her brother—to be truly mad. In medieval times, the mad person was thought to be inhabited by an evil spirit. The treatment was identification of the spirit and exorcism by a cleric. Exorcisms of evil spirits were still conducted in Shakespeare’s day. The indigent mad person was allowed to live in an almshouse and go about freely unless dangerous. General medical practice in Shakespeare’s day emphasized hygiene, herbal remedies, and dietary recommendations. Even in medieval times, teaching hospitals kept botanical gardens and made herbal medicines, and the discovery of the Americas and also voyages to India led to the introduction of many more plants and herbs to Elizabethan England. Ophelia’s songs contain herbal lore linking properties and symbolism of various plants, including rosemary, pansies, fennel, columbines, rue, daisies, and violets.

In modern times, the medical community has a wide range of approaches available for the treatment of mental illness. Many patients of longer term psychotherapy, defined as extending over more than six months, report satisfaction with the improvement of their mental health. Some are as well-pleased with this “talk therapy” alone as with a combination of therapy and prescription medication, which can have such unwanted side effects as drowsiness and disorientation. Available treatments include the following therapies: Freudian, cognitive, interpersonal, behavioral, drug, and shock. Techniques such as meditation and biofeedback are also used.

Just as maintaining individual physical health was and is viewed as important, maintaining the political well-being of the state is also considered to be of utmost importance, especially to political leaders to whom a good portion of this responsibility falls. Threats against the state in the form of plots, actual or imagined, intended to overthrow the ruler were concerns of the Elizabethan court. Poisons were a cause of concern. In some political settings, including Italian and French courts and sub-kingdoms, ingenious poisons were sometimes resorted to as a way of eliminating enemies. In *Hamlet*, Hamlet’s royal father is killed by a rival claimant to his throne by the method of pouring a poison into his ear while he was sleeping. The poison, distilled henbane, was an extraction made from a Mediterranean plant using the relatively new and popular method of distillation just becoming better known in Elizabethan England. Queen Elizabeth feared plotters, and several sensationalized alleged or actual poison plots were uncovered and tried during or shortly after her reign.

In Elizabethan England, suspicion and intrigue played a role in the defense of the realm against dangers from within. Court spying in England and abroad reached an accomplished level under Queen Elizabeth. Her employee Francis Walsingham has the distinction of being the first master of developing the modern spy state. In *Hamlet*, the intelligence-gathering done or attempted by Rosencrantz and Guildenstern was considered, at least by King Claudius, to be a necessary part of maintaining order. Disorder in a state could also be mirrored by disorder in a family. Hamlet is forced to live in a family scarred by murder and what was considered a form of incest by Elizabethan standards. Hamlet laments the disorder in his family and in the realm and exclaims against it when he says: “The time is out of joint—O cursed spite, / That ever I was born to set it right!” (I.v.188-89).

In twentieth-century society, concerns about sophisticated poisons inherent in chemical and biological hazards extend in a number of directions, from industrial pollutants, to medical/biological hazardous wastes, to
biological and chemical warfare, to the potential actions of state-sponsored terrorists, private pathologically oriented citizens, or cult leaders. Safeguards are present in the form of environmental groups, federal and state legislation, industry watchdogs, and government agencies. Governments worldwide have become more aware of the necessity of guarding against attacks on both political leaders and ordinary citizens by terrorists and anarchists. In addition, people of all views along the political spectrum seem to be acknowledging the need for strong, well-functioning families as a basis for a strong society.

Physical health and political health are related to, to some extent, society’s view of the universe and the place of humanity in it. The Elizabethan world view, as it was expressed in a classic phrase by the critic E. M. W. Tillyard, was hierarchical and pyramidal. The structure depicted God at the apex, angels and the spiritual world below God, the king below God and receiving his power from God, followed by nobles, gentry, and ordinary people. Below this was the animal kingdom, then plants, then minerals and stones. Each subdivision had its own order of excellence as well. This view is based on biblical passages, including verses in Genesis. A brief, lyrical expression of the view is found in Psalm 8. Hamlet’s own beliefs may be represented by this view, though when he discusses it with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, he is in, if not a state of disbelief, then a state of melancholy, disgust, and world-weariness. He says of himself, ‘‘I have of late—but wherefore I know not—lost all my mirth, forgone all custom of exercises’’ (II.ii.295-97); he refers to man as ‘‘this quintessence of dust’’ (II.ii.308) and says of the rest,

this goodly frame, the earth, seems to me a sterile promontory; this most excellent canopy, the
air, look you, this
brave o’erhanging firmament, this majestical roof
fretted with golden fire, why, it appears no other
thing to me than a foul and pestilent congregation of vapors.
(II.ii.298-303)

A related theological view is that each individual is called to an accounting of his actions at the moment of his death. Although in the Christian view atonement was gained for all men through Christ’s death, the individual believer must nevertheless maintain himself in a state of grace and be a follower of Christ in his own actions. The individual who dies in a state of sin rather than a state of grace may be judged in need of purging (purgatorial) punishments or even deserving of everlasting torments, depending on the severity of the sin(s) and the disposition of the sinner. Because the fiery torments described by the ghost in Hamlet have a terminal point, the ghost is often thought of as coming from Purgatory rather than Hell. Hamlet decides not to kill Claudius while the king is in a praying, repentant state. Instead, Hamlet says he will wait to catch Claudius when he is drunk or ‘‘in the incestuous pleasure of his bed’’ (III.iii.90) so that Claudius will die in a state of sin when his ‘‘soul may be as damn’d and black / As Hell, whereto it goes’’ (III.iii.94-95).

In modern society, a range of views is held by both Christians and non-Christians on the nature and extent of what have been called the ‘‘Four Last Things’’—Death, Judgment, Hell and Heaven. Some people believe that the list of the elect (those saved) is small and is determined ahead of time, while others doubt the existence of Hell or question whether Hell lasts forever. Some people believe that only the members of their own particular religious sect can be saved, while others believe salvation has been gained for all who have faith, regardless of their adherence to the precepts of an institutional church.

Finally, in today’s society, many views are also held about the place of humanity in the universe. Each new scientific discovery brings with it a re-examination, restatement, or reformulation of previous views. For example, the recent (August, 1996) apparent discovery of microscopic life on Mars has caused some people to re-examine the question of whether or not the inhabitants of Earth are the only examples of intelligent life in the universe.
Analysis: Media Adaptations

Media Adaptations

- **Hamlet.** Universal, J. Arthur Rank, 1948. Film adaptation of *Hamlet* by Laurence Olivier, who directed and starred in the production. The motion picture also features Eileen Herlie, Basil Sydney, Jean Simmons, and Anthony Quayle. Distributed by RCA VideoDiscs. 155 minutes.


- **Hamlet.** BBC, Time Life Television, 1979. Television adaptation of Shakespeare’s tragedy and part of the series “The Shakespeare Plays.” Features Derek Jacobi as Hamlet. Distributed by Time-Life Video. 150 minutes.


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Further Reading


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Prosser, Eleanor. “Hamlet” and Revenge. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1967. Prosser uses an historical approach to try to answer such central questions as the Elizabethans’ attitude toward revenge, the nature of the father’s ghost, and regicide.

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Wilson, John Dover. *What Happens in Hamlet*. 3d ed. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1951. Wilson attempts to resolve all of the unsolved questions in the play by a close analysis of the text. Suggests plausible answers for some of the problems but fails to resolve the most important ones.
Brevity is the soul of wit (2.2.90)

This phrase is from Polonius’s speech to Gertrude and Claudius concerning why he thinks young Hamlet is mad. But he seems to be having a hard time getting to the point. It must be remembered that, although Polonius is a minister in the Danish court, he is still talking to the King and Queen of Denmark as well as the uncle/step-father and mother of a man who could be the next King. He just cannot blurt out that he has a corny love letter from Hamlet to Ophelia that suggests he is lovesick, which in the Renaissance, was considered a medical condition that could result in death. A man affected by this disease was known as an enamorato. Polonius therefore skirts the issue until Gertrude gives him a way in: ‘‘More matter, with less art’’ (95), or in other words, get to the point.

Cruel to be kind (3.4.178)

Polonius, with Gertrude and Claudius’s approval, intends to cure Hamlet of his lovesickness by getting Gertrude to tell him to snap out of it. Hamlet, who has just been given an opportunity to kill Claudius in the chapel, goes to see his mother to beg her to give up Claudius. Their exchange is fiery and angry. Hamlet murders Polonius, who is hiding behind the arras and sees his father’s Ghost again. Hamlet spends a good deal of time trying to rationalize his action against Polonius, but then his thoughts turn again to his mother. He begs her not to sleep with Polonius and she agrees. Realizing that so much violence has passed during their meeting, he tells her that he ‘‘must be cruel only to be kind.’’ But Hamlet is also speaking to the audience, letting them know that his treatment of Ophelia, Polonius, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern fits into his plan for revenge of his father’s murder. In order to be kind to those who have been tainted by Claudius, Hamlet must be cruel and mad.

A hit, a very palpable hit (5.2.281)

During the duel between Laertes and Hamlet, Hamlet scores a point which Laertes contests. Hamlet looks to Osric for a judgment of whether he scored. Osric replies with ‘‘A hit, a very palpable hit.’’ For the Elizabethans, ‘‘palpable,’’ which had originally meant ‘‘sensitive to the touch,’’ had come to mean ‘‘perceivable by any of the senses.’’ Here Shakespeare also intends an ironic meaning. When Hamlet has been hit by the poisoned tip of Laertes’ sword, he will feel it physically.

The lady doth protest too much (3.2.230)

During the play-within-a-play, The Murder of Gonzago, Hamlet asks his mother how she likes the play. His question is pointed. The Queen has been watching the Player Queen swear undying devotion to her husband and that she will never take another husband after he is dead. Her life will simply end. This, in Hamlet’s opinion, is how Gertrude should have behaved when King Hamlet died. For Shakespeare’s audience, ‘‘protest’’ meant to make a vow or a solemn promise. What Gertrude is actually saying is that the Player Queen’s vows and promises are ‘‘too much,’’ too pretty, too unbelievable. Unfortunately, we do not know what kind of marriage Gertrude and King Hamlet had, only Hamlet’s perception of how they behaved toward each other in his presence, so that by her response, Gertrude may be implying that such vows as these are typical of a silly first love, and that such silliness is not part of her own second marriage.

Method in the madness (2.2.205-206)
Polonius, trying to discover what ails Hamlet, comes upon him reading, and engages him in conversation. Though Hamlet’s responses do not make much sense, Polonius can see that they could not be the ravings of a madman (such as will be seen with Ophelia), but that they seem to be carefully crafted responses. Hamlet is using Polonius’s own techniques to make fun of the old man by enumerating the many characteristics of feeble, old men. The phrase really reads: “Though this be madness, yet there is method in ’t.” Like many of the phrases from Hamlet, we often change it to: there’s a method to my madness.

**Neither a borrower nor a lender be (1.3.75)**

When Laertes gets permission from Claudius to go to France for an education in gentleman’s ways, Polonius offers him a speech full of clichés and platitudes. This advice is probably the most famous, followed by “to thine own self be true” (78). It may seem to us that Polonius is just telling Laertes the obvious, but in Shakespeare’s audience were probably many gentlemen who had borrowed extensively from other gentlemen. This borrowing became so common that many men had to sell off pieces of their estates in order to maintain their lavish lifestyle in London to the disadvantage of their heirs. Borrowing did not matter as much as the keeping up of appearances, a theme in many Shakespeare plays.

**The play’s the thing (2.2.604)**

This phrase is used and adapted by many critics of theater and film in their reviews, as well as by marketing firms substituting the name of their product for the word “play.” What is never questioned is the word “thing.” What “thing” do we mean? Or is it THE thing? For Hamlet, the “thing” is the play, The Murder of Gonzago, in which he will insert “some dozen or sixteen lines, which I would set down” (2.2.541-542) that would apply to Claudius. Depending on the King’s reaction, Hamlet will have the proof that he needs to believe what the Ghost has told him. We can easily believe that Claudius might be moved by such a play as we are familiar with “tear-jerker” movies and other visual events that have an effect on audiences.

**Something is rotten in the state of Denmark (1.4.90)**

Marcellus, a guard on duty at Elsinore at the opening of *Hamlet*, recognizes that all is not well with the government of Denmark when he and Horatio go to tell Hamlet they have seen his father’s Ghost. He bases this belief on the Ghost appearing on the ramparts, the non-stop, around-the-clock preparations for war at the castle, and the wedding of the widow to her brother-in-law so quickly after the funeral of her first husband, his brother. Though Hamlet beckons the men to follow him when he meets the Ghost, they refuse to follow someone in such a manic state. Hamlet, however, who does not hear Marcellus’s remark, had previously referred to Denmark as “an unweeded garden / That grows to seed; things rank and gross in nature / Possess it merely” (1.2.135-137). Everyone, not just Hamlet, Marcellus, and Horatio, will soon know just how far the rot extends.

**To be, or not to be (3.1.56)**

Probably the most famous of Shakespeare’s quotes, this line occurs just before Hamlet’s confrontation with Ophelia. Hamlet, educated apparently in the humanist tradition, debates with himself over whether he should go through with the plan to avenge his father’s death to its ultimate conclusion, using all his capabilities, or just give up and kill himself. He wonders if there is an afterlife, and if there is, why no one has returned to tell the rest of us what it is like. He may be recalling that Ghosts could tell, but will not tell of his torments. This thought raises the question of which is better: to suffer now or suffer later. Or is death just a dream, a gentle sleep with only sweet dreams?

**Alas, poor Yorick (5.1.185)**
Because of limited burial space in Shakespeare’s day, graves were frequently recycled. The graves would be cleared of the bones of the previous tenant, and would then be taken to a charnel house. This may be why Shakespeare left a curse on whoever moved his bones as his epitaph. When the Grave Digger clears a grave for Ophelia, the grave he is unearthing is that of Yorick, the old King Hamlet’s jester. When Hamlet was a boy, Yorick would amuse the young Prince with jokes and stories. Hamlet, just returned from England and his adventures with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, has obviously had time to think about his “to be or not to be” soliloquy, and has come to the conclusion that all men, happy or sad, comic or tragic, die.

The Serpent that did sting thy father’s life / Now wears his crown (1.5.39-40)

The ghost of Hamlet’s father speaks these lines in explaining to Hamlet that Claudius murdered him, and that Hamlet must avenge his father’s death. These lines set the stage for the basic plot in the play.

The time is out of joint: O cursed spite, / That I ever was born to set it right (1.5.188-89)

Hamlet, now with the burden of avenging his father’s death, laments his state. The quote illustrates Hamlet’s view of the enormity of the task, and foreshadows his wavering and hesitation.

What a piece of work is a man! / How noble in reason, how infinite in faculties (2.2.303-04)

Part of one of the most famous of Hamlet’s speeches in the play, the quote illustrates Hamlet’s philosophical dilemma. He proclaims the goodness and beauty of man, but his father’s death and the ill-fated events make him ponder whether it is all an illusion, and whether life is a meaningless sham.

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 (3.2.71-73)

In many of Shakespeare’s plays, the conflict between man’s passion and his reason is apparent, especially in Hamlet, who vacillates between action and restraint. In the context of the quote, Hamlet appears to be referring to Claudius, who he hopes to catch with a guilty face upon seeing the play that Hamlet has orchestrated.

My words fly up, my thoughts remain below: / Words without thoughts never to heaven go (3.3.97-98)

Spoken by Claudius at the end of the scene, they express his futility in attempting to pray for forgiveness for his murder of King Hamlet. He is unable to relinquish everything he has gained from the murder, and thus has not atoned for the act. Consequently, his prayer lacks sincerity, and is merely “words.”

O, from this time forth, / My thoughts be bloody, or be nothing worth (4.4.65-66)

Shocked and dismayed at his inability to act, Hamlet firmly resolves at the close of this scene to take action. In this soliloquy he compares his inaction with Prince Fortinbras and his army, who are bravely fighting over a plot of land, the latter fighting and dying for causes far less compelling than Hamlet’s.

There’s a special providence in the fall of a sparrow (5.2.219-20)

As Hamlet prepares for a fencing match with Laertes, Horatio asks Hamlet if he would like a delay, but in an often-quoted speech, Hamlet refuses, saying that whatever happens is God’s will, including the fall of a sparrow, a reference found in the Gospel of Matthew. Hamlet finally appears at peace, ready to accept his fate.
Quotes in Context: "A Consummation Devoutly To Be Wished"

Context: Hamlet, the meditative, melancholy Prince of Denmark, finds himself with a father dead and a mother taken in an incestuous marriage by his uncle, declared by the Ghost of his father to be the murderer. In his most famous soliloquy, Hamlet, faced with the necessity for revenge, considers his course of action. The idea of the cessation of life through suicide pleases him, but the consequences of the act do not.

HAMLETTo be, or not to be, that is the question—Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to sufferThe slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,And by opposing end them. To die, to sleep—No more; and by a sleep to say we endThe heart-ache, and the thousand natural shocksThat flesh is heir to; 'tis a consummationDevoutly to be wished. To die, to sleep—To sleep, perchance to dream, ay there's the rub,For in that sleep of death what dreams may comeWhen we have shuffled off this mortal coil,Must give us pause;...

Quotes in Context: "A Dream Itself Is But A Shadow"

Context: As Hamlet probes further the story told him by his father's ghost—that his father was murdered by his Uncle Claudius, the present king, and that his mother had committed adultery with Claudius—the young prince feigns madness and is himself probed by others eager to discover the cause of his madness. The king and queen send for two of Hamlet's youthful companions, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, who agree to scout the melancholy Dane. The quick-witted Hamlet spars with his old friends—who wonder whether ambition may be at the root of his trouble, that is, disappointment at not being made king after his father's death—and manages to keep them interested while avoiding any definite commitment. Hamlet calls Denmark a prison; Rosencrantz and Guildenstern protest:

HAMLETTWhy then 'tis none to you; for there is nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it so. To me it is a prison.ROSENCRANTZWhy then your ambition makes it one; 'tis too narrow for your mind.HAMLETO God, I could be bounded in a nutshell, and count myself a king of infinite space, were it not that I have bad dreams.GUILDENSTERNWhich dreams indeed are ambition, for the very substance of the ambitious is merely the shadow of a dream.HAMLETA dream itself is but a shadow.

Quotes in Context: "A King Of Shreds And Patches"

Context: Prince Hamlet of Denmark is informed by his father's ghost that he, his father, was murdered by his brother Claudius, who is now king, and that Queen Gertrude, Hamlet's mother, was adulterous with Claudius. Hamlet swears to avenge his father's murder. Before he does, he arranges to have actors play, in the presence of his uncle and mother, a scene depicting his father's murder. Claudius' reactions prove to Hamlet that the king is indeed guilty. His mother is upset by the play and summons Hamlet to her chamber to upbraid him. Instead, he shakes her to her very soul by reminding her of her adulterous past, and contrasting the virtues and nobility of her first husband to the evil and villainy of Claudius. The phrase "shreds and patches" is a famous line in a song from The Mikado (1885) by W. S. Gilbert. It is there used in a warmly human, and humorous, sense, and not as Shakespeare employed it.

HAMLETA murderer and a villain,A slave that is not twentieth part the titheOf your precedent lord, a vice of kings,A cutpurse of the empire and the rule,That from a shelf the precious diadem stoleAnd put it in his pocket.GERTRUDENo more.HAMLETA king of
Quotes in Context: "A Little More Than Kin, And Less Than Kind"

Context: Claudius, brother to King Hamlet, has secretly murdered his brother, usurped the throne from its rightful owner, Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, and married immediately his former sister-in-law, Queen Gertrude. Young Hamlet, unaware of the fact that Claudius has killed the noble king, but feeling deeply the difference between the two kings, and the hasty marriage of his mother to his uncle, broods about the court. On his first appearance in the play, Claudius acts the role of the good king by attending to the affairs of state and to the personal affairs of Laertes, the son of his Lord Chamberlain. Then he turns to Hamlet and attempts to show fatherly concern for the unhappy prince, who cannot accept the low Claudius as replacing his own noble father. He replies to the words of Claudius, in an aside, in words that may be paraphrased as "I am more closely related to you than cousin (step-son), but little like you in nature." However, he may mean in the second part of the phrase that he cannot be kind to his uncle, that he hates the usurper.

CLAUDIUSTake thy fair hour Laertes, time be thine,And thy best graces spend it at thy will.But now, my cousin Hamlet, and my son.HAMLET [aside]A little more than kin, and less than kind.

Quotes in Context: "A Method In His Madness"

Context: This phrase is often used, in the misquoted form given above, when anyone obtains sensible results by means not readily understood, or by means which strike the viewer as odd, strange, or eccentric. In the play, Prince Hamlet learns that his father was murdered by his father's brother, the present King Claudius of Denmark. In order to screen his own thoughts and actions and to disarm his well-guarded uncle, Hamlet pretends to be demented. Polonius, the king's chief councilor, believes him to be so and tries to get further confirmation of his belief. Hamlet, aware of Polonius' intentions, and, under cover of his pretended madness, makes game of the tedious old fool. Hamlet is reading as he walks. Polonius asks him what he is reading.

HAMLETWords, words, words... . . .POLONIUSI mean the matter that you read, my lord.HAMLETSlanders sir, for the satirical rogue says here, that old men have grey beards [and] that their faces are wrinkled, . . . I hold it not honesty to have it thus set down; for yourself sir shall grow old as I am, if like a crab you could go backward.POLONIUS [aside]Though this be madness, yet there is method in't... . . .

Quotes in Context: "A Very Riband In The Cap Of Youth"

Context: Together, Claudius and Laertes plot the death of Hamlet—Claudius because he fears the prince may know that he, Claudius, killed Hamlet's father; Laertes because Hamlet mistakenly killed Polonius, Laertes' father. They plan a friendly fencing-match in which Laertes' rapier will not be blunted, as a practice rapier should be, and will be touched with poison. Claudius is quite certain he can get Hamlet to agree to the match because Hamlet envies Laertes' reputation for swordsmanship and has desired to match himself against his rival. Swordplay, according to Claudius, is a mere ornament, like the ribbons courtiers sometimes wear in their caps, and yet it is as becoming to youth as furs and dignified attire are to the more aged, who must look after their health and dignity:

KINGA very riband in the cap of youth;Yet needful too, for youth no less becomes The light and careless livery that it wears Than settled age his sables and his weeds Importing health and
Quotes in Context: "Absent Thee From Felicity Awhile"

Context: King Claudius of Denmark seeks the death of his nephew, Prince Hamlet. He hits upon a fencing match between Hamlet and Laertes. Laertes wants Hamlet dead to avenge his father, whom the prince accidentally killed. During the fencing bout, Laertes uses a rapier dipped in poison and wounds Hamlet. In the following scuffle, they exchange rapiers, and Laertes is hit with his own envenomed blade. Dying, he tells Hamlet that the king is to blame. Meanwhile, the queen unknowingly drinks from a poisoned cup, and is another victim of the king's machinations. In revenge, Hamlet kills Claudius. Now, expiring, Hamlet wrests the poisoned cup from his friend Horatio's lips and bids him live.

HAMLETAs th'art a man,Give me the cup–let go, by heaven I'll ha't.O God, Horatio, what a wounded name,Things standing thus unknown, shall live behind me.If thou did'st ever hold me in thy heart,Absent thee from felicity awhile,And in this harsh world draw thy breath in painTo tell my story... . .

Quotes in Context: "Alas Poor Yorick!"

Context: Prince Hamlet of Denmark has been at sea. Now he is back home, still seeking to avenge his murdered father. He is with his close friend and schoolfellow, Horatio, and they pause at a graveyard near Elsinore Castle. They talk to a sexton who is digging a grave.

SEXTON. . . Here's a skull now hath lien you i' th' earth three and twenty years.HAMLETWhose was it?. . .SEXTONA pestilence on him for a mad rogue, 'a poured a flagon of Rhenish on my head once; this same skull sir; was sir, Yorick's skull, the King's jester... . .HAMLETLet me see [Takes the skull.] Alas poor Yorick! I knew him Horatio, a fellow of infinite jest, of most excellent fancy; . . .

Quotes in Context: "All That Lives Must Die"

Context: Young Prince Hamlet of Denmark is in mourning for his dead father both in spirit and apparel. Amid the fresh brightness of new King Claudius' court at Elsinore, he, dressed in black and with brooding countenance, is like a living reproach. Claudius, ascending the throne after a short mourning period for his dead brother King Hamlet, announces to the court his recent and too hasty marriage to the late king's widow, Gertrude. This marriage adds to Prince Hamlet's smoldering anger, for he considers it incestuous. Now, when Claudius completes his announcement and finishes some court business, he speaks to young Hamlet and is sharply rebuffed. Hamlet's mother, Queen Gertrude, quickly intervenes, eager to reconcile the recalcitrant young prince to her new, if irregular, alliance.

GERTRUDEGood Hamlet, cast thy nighted colour off,And let thine eye look like a friend on Denmark.Do not forever with thy vailed lidsSeek for thy noble father in the dust.Thou know'st 'tis common, all that lives must die,Passing through nature to eternity.

Quotes in Context: "An Eye Like Mars, To Threaten And Command"
Context: Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, robbed by his uncle of a father by murder, of a mother by an incestuous marriage, and a throne by usurpation, confronts his mother and reproaches her in her chamber. Inviting her to compare pictures of her noble first husband and her base second husband, he assesses the two men.

HAMLET Look here upon this picture, and on this, The counterfeit presentment of two brothers. See what a grace was seated on this brow. Hyperion's curls, the front of Jove himself, An eye like Mars, to threaten and command, A station like the herald Mercury, New lighted on a heaven-kissing hill, A combination and a form indeed, Where every god did seem to set his seal To give the world assurance of a man. This was your husband, look you now what follows. Here is your husband like a mildewed ear, Blasting his wholesome brother. Have you eyes, Could you on this fair mountain leave to feed, And batten on this moor? Ha, have you eyes? . . .

Quotes in Context: "An Old Man Is Twice A Child"

Context: Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, former friends of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, are instructed by King Claudius to cheer up the brooding prince and, if possible, to determine the cause of his melancholy. They fail to learn the real cause of his state of mind, but they are able to inform him of the approach of some traveling actors, whom Hamlet greets with delight. When Polonius, the Lord Chamberlain, who is tedious, naïve, and knowledgeable in the obvious, enters, Hamlet ridicules the old man, and Rosencrantz generalizes on age.

POLONIUS Well be with you, gentlemen. HAMLETHark you Guildenstern, and you too, at each ear a hearer—thou great baby thou see there is not yet out of his swaddling-clouts. ROSENCRANTZ Happily he is the second time come to them, for they say an old man is twice a child. HAMLETI will prophesy, he comes to tell me of the players; . . . .

Quotes in Context: "Angels And Ministers Of Grace Defend Us"

Context: King Hamlet of Denmark is only recently dead. Thrice has his ghost been seen on the battlements of Elsinore Castle. The most recent visitation was witnessed not only by Bernardo and Marcellus, officers of the watch who saw it earlier, but also, at their insistence, by Horatio, a friend of the late king's son, Prince Hamlet. Prince Hamlet is with them on the ramparts late the following night to see and speak with the ghost should he again appear. As Hamlet and Horatio are conversing about some local customs, the apparition of the dead king suddenly appears.

HORATIO Look my lord, it comes. HAMLET Angels and ministers of grace defend us. Be thou a spirit of health, or goblin damned, Bring with thee airs from heaven, or blasts from hell, Be thy intents wicked, or charitable, Thou com'st in such a questionable shape, That I will speak to thee... . .

Quotes in Context: "As Hardy As The Nemean Lion's Nerve"

Context: In the frosty night before the castle at Elsinore, Hamlet encounters the ghost of his father. He is bursting with impatience to know what the purpose of the apparition is: "What may this mean. . . . What should we do?" But the ghost wishes to speak to Hamlet in private, and since others are present—the sentinels and Hamlet's friend, Horatio—the spirit beckons Hamlet away. However, no one knows, at this point, whether the spirit is the ghost of Hamlet's father or a demon in his father's shape; therefore, the prince's companions
warn Hamlet against following. But Hamlet insists that he will follow. He hears his destiny calling, and every artery in his body feels as bold as the great lion whose slaying was the first of the Twelve Labors of Hercules, and he insists that he will create another ghost of anyone who hinders—"lets"—him:

HAMLET
It waves me still. Go on; I'll follow thee.
MARCELLUS
You shall not go my lord.
HAMLET
Hold off your hands.
HORATIO
Be ruled, you shall not go.
HAMLET
My fate cries out, And makes each petty artery in this body As hardy as the Nemean lion's nerve. Still am I called. Unhand me gentlemen—By heaven I'll make a ghost of him that lets me. I say, away!—Go on, I'll follow thee. [Exeunt GHOST and HAMLET.]

**Quotes in Context: "Ay There's The Rub"**

Context: Prince Hamlet of Denmark learns that his father was murdered by Claudius, his father's brother who is now king and that Queen Gertrude, Hamlet's mother, was adulterous with Claudius. Hamlet, already heart sick at his mother's hasty and incestuous marriage with Claudius, and knowing that Claudius has usurped the throne that should have been his, is horrified and distracted at this double blow. He swears to avenge his father's murder. But how? Claudius is king, well-guarded, powerful. Hamlet feigns madness to screen himself and possibly to disarm Claudius, and in addition plans to test the accuracy of the ghost's accusation by having the visiting players enact a scene like the murder of his father in the king's presence. Now, despondent, and hating his life and the corruption about him, he plays with the idea of death.

HAMLET... To die, to sleep—To sleep, perchance to dream, ay there's the rub. For in that sleep of death what dreams may come When we have shuffled off this mortal coil, Must give us pause; there's the respect That makes calamity of so long life... .

**Quotes in Context: "Brevity Is The Soul Of Wit"**

Context: This pithy saying has become a proverb around the world. In the play, young Prince Hamlet of Denmark is informed by his dead father's ghost that he was murdered in his sleep by his brother Claudius, the present king, and that Hamlet's mother, Gertrude, was adulterous with Claudius. Hamlet swears to avenge his father. But how will he accomplish the revenge against the well-guarded king? As a beginning, Hamlet pretends madness, which ruse, if he is convincing, may disarm Claudius. The prince behaves oddly in the presence of Ophelia, daughter of the king's chief councilor, Polonius. Ophelia tells her father, and he concludes that Hamlet is mad. The tedious Polonius reports Hamlet's strange behavior to the king and queen:

POLONIUS
My liege, and madam, to expostulate What majesty should be, what duty is, Why day is day, night night, and time is time, Were nothing but to waste night, day, and time. Therefore since brevity is the soul of wit, And tediousness the limbs and outward flourishes, I will be brief—your noble son is mad... .

**Quotes in Context: "Caviar To The General"**

Context: Caviar, the roe of the sturgeon, which is pickled, salted, and prepared as a relish, requires for its appreciation a cultivated palate. Ordinary people, in Shakespeare's day, did not have this acquired appetite. Therefore, if they ate caviar they would not like or appreciate it. By extension, the saying means above or beyond the comprehension or taste of ordinary people. In the play, Prince Hamlet greets a band of strolling players who come to Elsinore Castle. He asks their leader to give a speech, a passionate speech, and the leader replies:
FIRST PLAYER What speech my good lord? HAMLET I heard thee speak me a speech once, but it was never acted, or if it was, not above once, for the play I remember pleased not the million, 'twas caviar to the general; but it was, as I received it, . . . an excellent play, . . .

Quotes in Context: "Dead For A Ducat, Dead"

Context: Queen Gertrude of Denmark witnesses a play, managed by her son, Prince Hamlet, in which the Player Queen protests overly much that she loves the Player King before he is murdered. The play and Hamlet's commentary parallel the actual events, in which Gertrude loved King Hamlet, was seduced by his brother, was widowed, and then married the seducer-murderer, Claudius, who is now king. The play is abruptly halted. The King is frightened and the Queen insulted. She summons Hamlet to her chamber to upbraid him. Hidden in the room behind the arras is Polonius, the king's chief councilor, to overhear Hamlet's words. Hamlet, distracted and angry, handles his mother roughly. Her cries for help are echoed by Polonius. Hamlet thinks the voice is that of Claudius and seizes the opportunity to avenge his murdered father.

HAMLET [draws]. How now! A rat? Dead for a ducat, dead. [Makes a pass through the arras.] POLONIUS [behind]. O I am slain. GERTRUDE O me, what hast thou done? HAMLETNay I know not. Is it the King?

Quotes in Context: "Frailty, Thy Name Is Woman"

Context: The outstanding attitude voiced by Hamlet in his first soliloquy, of which this saying is a part, is disgust with his mother's unseemly marriage to her dead husband's brother and hence Hamlet's uncle, Claudius. The too-short period of mourning for the dead king is over; Claudius has ascended the throne, and he has announced his marriage to Queen Gertrude, Prince Hamlet's mother. Everything has been done hastily. Hamlet considers his mother's re-marriage as incestuous and, therefore, abhorrent to him. His ideals about her are shattered.

HAMLETTThat it should come to this—But two months dead, nay not so much, not two—So excellent a King, that was to this Hyperion to a satyr,. . . Heaven and earth, Must I remember? Why she would hang on him As if increase of appetite had grown By what it fed on, and yet within a month—Let me not think on't—Frailty, thy name is woman. A little month or e'er those shoes were old With which she followed my poor father's body, Like Niobe all tears, why she, even she—O God, a beast that wants discourse of reason Would have mourned longer—married with my uncle,. . .

Quotes in Context: "Get Thee To A Nunnery"

Context: This saying has a double meaning. In Shakespeare's day, "nunnery" was a vulgar, cant word meaning "brothel." Thus, the quotation has the obvious, denotative meaning as well as the vulgar connotative interpretation. In Hamlet, the prince thinks about death as a way out of his troubled life as he walks in the great hall of Elsinore Castle. He sees Ophelia, daughter of the king's chief councilor, Polonius. Hamlet knows King Claudius, his usurping, murderous uncle, is with Polonius somewhere about, spying upon him, trying to determine if he is indeed insane. He knows that Ophelia is planted in his way. The plot angers him, and any relationship that existed between Ophelia and Hamlet is shattered. He is cold and harsh to her. She is lending herself to duplicity, and he is very sensitive about such behavior.

HAMLETTIf thou dost marry, I'll give thee this plague for thy dowry—be thou as chaste as ice, as pure as snow, thou shalt not escape calumny. Get thee to a nunnery; go, farewell. Or if thou
will needs marry, marry a fool, for wise men know well enough what monsters you make of them. To a nunnery go, and quickly too. Farewell.

OPHELIA: heavenly powers, restore him.

Quotes in Context: "Give Me That Man That Is Not Passion's Slave"

Context: Prince Hamlet of Denmark learns that his father was murdered by Claudius, his father's brother who is now king. Hamlet swears to avenge his father's murder. But before he does so, he must confirm the new king's guilt. When a band of players come to Elsinore Castle, he plans that they play before his uncle a scene like the murder of his father. How Claudius reacts will indicate his guilty or innocent conscience. But Hamlet must have someone he trusts observe his uncle during the play. His old friend Horatio is that man. Hamlet intimates how much he trusts him.

HAMLET. . .Dost thou hear–Since my dear soul was mistress of her choice, And could of men distinguish, her election Hath sealed thee for herself, for thou hast been As one in suffering all that suffers nothing,. . .Whose blood and judgment are so well comedled, 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... .

Quotes in Context: "Goodnight Sweet Prince"

Context: This poignant farewell, spoken by Horatio at the death of Hamlet, is in fitting contrast to the violence just witnessed; and the line that follows is one of the most beautiful single lines in all Shakespeare. Hamlet and Laertes have just fought a duel in which each has been fatally wounded by a rapier point to which King Claudius has ordered poison applied; Queen Gertrude has died from drinking poison intended for Hamlet by Claudius; and Hamlet has at last avenged his murdered father by stabbing Claudius with the poisoned rapier. With his waning strength Hamlet urges his faithful friend Horatio to tell all the world the sordid details of Claudius' treachery. Then with his dying breath he concerns himself with affairs of state.

HAMLETO I die Horatio, The potent poison quite o'er-crows my spirit. I cannot live to hear the news from England, But I do prophesy th' election lights On Fortinbras, he has my dying voice; So tell him, with th' occurrents more and less Which have solicited–the rest is silence. [Dies.] HORATIONow cracks a noble heart. Good night sweet Prince, And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest... .

Quotes in Context: "Hair Stand On End"

Context: "Hair stand on end" is the usual form this saying takes today as in the sentence, "The scream was enough to make your hair stand on end!" The phrase connotes a physical reaction to any frightful or harrowing experience and is a synonym for excessive fear. In Hamlet, the ghost of Denmark's late King Hamlet has appeared three successive nights on the ramparts of Elsinore Castle. This night, Prince Hamlet is on the battlements with his friend Horatio and an officer of the guard, Marcellus, when the ghost again appears. The apparition does not answer Hamlet's queries but beckons the prince to follow him. Hamlet shakes off his friends and does so. The ghost begins its discourse by hinting at the horrors of purgatory.

GHOSTI am thy father's spirit,. . .But that I am forbid To tell the secrets of my prison-house, I could a tale unfold whose lightest word Would harrow up thy soul, freeze thy young blood, Make thy two eyes like stars start from their spheres, Thy knotted and combined locks

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to part, and each particular hair to stand an end, like quills upon the fretful porpentine... .

Quotes in Context: "Hoist With His Own Petard"

Context: This saying is often heard, usually in the form, "hoist on his own petard," and means, literally, "blown up by one's own torpedo." We use it whenever a trick, trap, or device backfires and victimizes its perpetrator. In the play, Prince Hamlet of Denmark is to be sent to England by his uncle, King Claudius, because he is considered dangerous to the crown. The king secretly plans to have Hamlet summarily executed once he reaches his destination. Two of Hamlet's erstwhile friends, who know the king's intent, are to accompany him. Hamlet is aware of the plot and plans countermeasures. He is speaking to his mother, Queen Gertrude.

HAMLET: I must to England, you know that.
GERTRUDE: Alack, I had forgot. 'Tis so concluded on.
HAMLET: There's letters sealed, and my two schoolfellows, whom I will trust as I will adders fanged, they bear the mandate; they must sweep my way, and marshal me to knavery. Let it work, for 'tis the sport to have the enginer hoist with his own petard; . . .

Quotes in Context: "I Do Not Set My Life At A Pin's Fee"

Context: "Not worth a pin" would seem to be a natural derivation from this line in Hamlet. However, one suspects that Shakespeare here used a comparison that was current in his time. In the play, King Hamlet of Denmark has only recently died. His ghost has been seen three times on the battlements of Elsinore Castle. The most recent visitation, the night before, was witnessed by Horatio, a good friend of the late king's son, Prince Hamlet. Now, late the following night, Hamlet is with his friend and a guard when the ghost materializes. Hamlet speaks to it, but it will not answer. Instead, the ghost beckons Hamlet to follow it. He starts to go, but one of the officers and Horatio try to dissuade him from doing so.

MARCELLUS: . . . But do not go with it.
HORATIO: No, by no means.
HAMLET: It will not speak; then I will follow it.
HORATIO: Do not my lord.
HAMLET: Why, what should be the fear? I do not set my life at a pin's fee. And for my soul, what can it do to that? Being a thing immortal as itself? It waves me forth again. I'll follow it.

Quotes in Context: "I Know A Hawk From A Handsaw"

Context: Hamlet is playing a very dangerous game. After having been told by his father's ghost that his Uncle Claudius, the present king, is the murderer of his father, Hamlet feigns madness while he feels his way. Two old schoolmates, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, have been set the task of determining the cause of Hamlet's madness. Hamlet lures them on, teasingly suggesting a number of possibilities. Finally, he almost, but not quite, admits his sanity. The proverb, "I know a hawk from a handsaw," means simply that he still has sense enough to distinguish obvious dissimilarities, and may be intended as an ironic attack on Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, who pretend loyalty and friendship. "Handsaw" is usually explained as a North Country word meaning "heron."

HAMLET: . . . You are welcome; but my uncle-father, and aunt-mother, are deceiv'd.
GUILDENSTERN: In what, my dear lord? I am but mad north-north-west; when the wind is southerly I know a hawk from a handsaw.
Quotes in Context: "I Must Be Cruel Only To Be Kind"

Context: Confronting his mother, Queen Gertrude, who has joined in an incestuous marriage with his uncle, Hamlet kills the evesdropping Polonius and reproaches his mother for the bestiality of her nature and begs her to repent. For his quickness to kill and his harshness with her, he asks forgiveness and explains the reason for his cruelty.

HAMLET. . . Once more good night, And when you are desirous to be blessed, I'll blessing beg of you. For this same lord, I do repent; but heaven hath pleased it so/ To punish me with this, and this with me, That I must be their scourge and minister. I will bestow him, and will answer well/ The death I gave him. So again good night. I must be cruel only to be kind. Thus bad begins, and worse remains behind. . . .

Quotes in Context: "I Will Speak Daggers To Her"

Context: Prince Hamlet of Denmark is informed that his uncle, King Claudius, murdered his father and that his mother, Queen Gertrude, was adulterous with Claudius. He swears to avenge his father. First, however, he must confirm his uncle's guilt by having actors play before Claudius a scene depicting the murder of his father. The royal couple and the court see the play. In it the Player Queen makes a great show of love for her first husband before he is murdered. The play is abruptly stopped by Claudius, who leaves the hall, followed by his startled court. The play is a grave insult to Gertrude, which the alarmed Claudius makes her feel more acutely. She sends for Hamlet. He is on his way to her.

HAMLET. . . 'Tis now the very witching time of night, When churchyards yawn, and hell itself breathes out Contagion to this world. . . . Soft, now to my mother. . . . Let me be cruel, not unnatural, I will speak daggers to her, but use none; My tongue and soul in this be hypocrites, How in my words somever she be shent, To give them seals never my soul consent.

Quotes in Context: "I'll Cross It, Though It Blast Me"

Context: The ghost of Hamlet's father appears twice in the opening scene of the play. After the first appearance, Hamlet's friend, Horatio, wonders what the apparition might mean—"This bodes some strange eruption to our state"—and notes that "In the most high and palmy state of Rome, A little ere the mightiest Julius fell, The graves stood tenantless, and the sheeted dead Did squeak and gibber in the Roman streets." When the ghost reappears, Horatio performs the dangerous act of moving directly into the path of the spirit. In calling upon the ghost to speak, Horatio lists the causes that may force a spirit to return to earth; he seems about to get a response when the cock crows and the ghost stalks away, for, according to ancient belief, ghosts and other walkers in darkness cannot endure the sunlight. The entire scene is extraordinarily dramatic:

HORATIO. . . [Re-enter GHOST.] But soft, behold, lo where it comes again. [GHOST spreads its arms.] I'll cross it, though it blast me. Stay illusion, If thou hast any sound or use of voice, Speak to me. If there be any good thing to be done That may to thee do ease, and grace to me, Speak to me. If thou art privy to any country's fate Which happily foreknowing may avoid, O speak. Or if thou hast uphoarded in thy life Extorted treasure in the womb of earth, For which they say you spirits oft walk in death, [Cock crows.] Speak of it; stay and speak. Stop it Marcellus.
Quotes in Context: "Imperious Caesar, Dead And Turned To Clay"

Context: Prince Hamlet of Denmark has been at sea. Now he is back home, still seeking to avenge his murdered father. He is with his close friend and schoolfellow, Horatio. They pause to talk to a sexton who is digging a grave in a churchyard near Elsinore Castle. The gravedigger shows them the skull of Yorick, who was the king's jester. Hamlet jokes grimly about the leveling effect of death.

HAMLETDost thou think Alexander looked a this fashion i' the' earth?HORATIOE'en so... .HAMLETTTo what base uses we may return, Horatio! Why may not imagination trace the noble dust of Alexander, till 'a find it stopping a bunghole? . . . Alexander died, . . . was buried, . . . [and] returneth to dust, the dust is earth, of earth we make loam, and why of that loam whereto he was converted might they not stop a beer barrel?Imperious Caesar, dead and turned to clay, Might stop a hole, to keep the wind away... .

Quotes in Context: "In My Mind's Eye"

Context: Prince Hamlet of Denmark is alone, brooding on his father's recent death and his mother's subsequent hasty and unseemly marriage to her dead husband's brother. Into his bitter reverie come his school friend from Wittenberg, Horatio, and Bernardo and Marcellus, officers of the night watch, with news that they have seen the ghost of King Hamlet on the battlements. First the two friends greet each other warmly: Horatio is still at Elsinore following the late king's funeral. Horatio's mention of his father again induces bitterness in Hamlet.

HAMLETTThrift, thrift, Horatio. The funeral baked meatsDid coldly furnish forth the marriage tables.Would I had met my dearest foe in heavenOr ever I had seen that day Horatio.My father–methinks I see my father.HORATIOWhere my lord?HAMLETIn my mind's eye Horatio.

Quotes in Context: "It Is An Honest Ghost"

Context: One of Hamlet's basic problems is that of the identity of the ghost who nightly walks at Elsinore. Is it the ghost of his father or a tempting demon in disguise? The problem is stated most clearly at the end of Act II: "The spirit that I have seen/ May be a devil, and the devil hath power/ T' assume a pleasing shape;... ." The question is raised at the first sighting of the ghost by Horatio and the watchmen, and it is reasserted by Hamlet at his first encounter, when he insists that he will speak to it, "Be thou a spirit of health, or goblin damned." But after the ghost tells Hamlet, in private, that he is his father's spirit, that he was murdered by Hamlet's uncle, Claudius, the present king, and that Claudius and Hamlet's mother, Gertrude, had earlier committed adultery, Hamlet concludes--though only for the moment--that the ghost is genuine--"honest"--and tells Horatio and the guard as much, though he refuses to disclose anything further:

HAMLETTouching this vision here--It is an honest ghost, that let me tell you--For your desire to know what is between us, O'ermaster't as you may... .

Quotes in Context: "It Smells To Heaven"

Context: King Claudius of Denmark murdered his brother, the late King Hamlet, and usurped the throne. He seduced Queen Gertrude and won her. Now, aware that his nephew, Prince Hamlet, suspects him of his evil
deeds, he is shaken and apprehensive. To soothe his conscience he tries to pray but cannot. His guilt will not allow it. He speaks his thoughts.

CLAUDIUS:O my offense is rank, it smells to heaven; It hath the primal eldest curse upon't, A brother's murder. Pray can I not Though inclination be as sharp as will. My stronger guilt defeats my strong intent... .

Quotes in Context: "Leave Her To Heaven"

Context: The ghost of Denmark's late King Hamlet has been seen three nights on the battlements of Elsinore Castle. It would not talk to anyone but young Prince Hamlet, who, tonight, is present when the apparition again appears. The prince follows the ghost when it will not speak in the presence of his companions, Horatio, a friend, and Marcellus, an officer of the watch. Now, in a deserted place at the foot of the battlements, the ghost tells young Hamlet that he, his father, was murdered in his sleep by his brother, the present king Claudius; and worse, that young Hamlet's mother, Queen Gertrude, was adulterous with Claudius. The ghost demands revenge on Claudius but enjoins Hamlet to harm not his mother.

GHOST... Let not the royal bed of Denmark be A couch for luxury and damned incest. But howsoever thou pursues this act, Taint not thy mind, nor let thy soul contrive Against thy mother aught; leave her to heaven, And to those thorns that in her bosom lodge To prick and sting her... .

Quotes in Context: "Let Me Wring Your Heart"

Context: Queen Gertrude of Denmark witnesses a play, managed by her son, Prince Hamlet, which, with Hamlet's commentary, closely parallels her own history. She loved her first husband (Hamlet's father), was seduced by Claudius (her brother-in-law), was widowed, and then married the seducer-murderer, who is now king. The play is abruptly halted. The king is frightened and the queen insulted. She summons Hamlet to her chamber to upbraid him, unaware that the play was meant to confirm Hamlet's belief that Claudius murdered his father. Hidden in the queen's chamber to overhear Hamlet's words, is Polonius, the king's chief councilor. Hamlet, distracted and angry, handles Gertrude roughly. Her cries for help are echoed by Polonius. Hamlet believes Claudius is behind the curtain, seizes the opportunity to avenge his murdered father, and kills Polonius by mistake. He then turns to his mother, who is distraught.

HAMLET... Leave wringing of your hands; peace sit you down, And let me wring your heart, for so I shall, If it be made of penetrable stuff... .

Quotes in Context: "Like Niobe All Tears"

Context: Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, bemoans his noble father's death, the usurpation of the throne by Claudius, his base uncle, and the hasty marriage of his mother, Queen Gertrude, to that same uncle. In his first soliloquy, he laments his mother's frailty and notes that although she wept at the funeral like Niobe whose fourteen children were slain by Apollo, she accepted Claudius in a marriage, which, in Hamlet's eyes, is an incestuous relationship.

HAMLET... That it should come to this–But two months dead, nay not so much, not two–So excellent a King, that was to this Hyperion to a satyr, so loving to my mother, That he might not beteem the winds of heaven Visit her face too roughly. Heaven and earth, Must I remember? Why she would hang on him As if increase of appetite had grown By what it fed.
on, and yet within a month—Let me not think on't—frailty, thy name is woman. A little month
or 'er those shoes were old With which she followed my poor father's body, Like Niobe all
ears, why she, even she—O God, a beast that wants discourse of reason Would have mourned
longer—married with my uncle, . . .

Quotes in Context: "More An Antique Roman Than A Dane"

Context: To assure Hamlet's death, Claudius and Laertes plan a fencing match in which Laertes is to use an
unblunted and poisoned sword against Hamlet. To make doubly sure of the death, Claudius prepares a
poisoned cup which the prince will take during a respite in the seemingly friendly fight. After Queen Gertrude
drinks from the cup and Claudius and Laertes die from the poisoned sword, Hamlet, mortally wounded by the
same sword, asks Horatio, his friend, to explain to the world the rightness of his actions. Horatio seeks to
follow his prince through suicide into death, as would a Roman, with the poisoned cup, but Hamlet urges him
to live.

HAMLET. . . Horatio, I am dead, Thou livest; report me and my cause aright To the
unsatisfied. HORATIO. . . I am more an antique Roman than a Dane. Here's yet some liquor
left. HAMLET As th' art a man, Give me the cup—let go, by heaven I'll ha't. O God, Horatio,
what a wounded name, Things standing thus unknown, shall live behind me. If thou didst ever
hold me in thy heart, Absent thee from felicity awhile, And in this harsh world draw thy breath
in pain, To tell my story . . .

Quotes in Context: "More In Sorrow Than In Anger"

Context: This line is usually heard in the contracted form given, but its meaning is precisely the same as
Shakespeare meant it in Hamlet. In the play, Horatio, a school friend of Prince Hamlet of Denmark, and two
officers of the watch, Bernardo and Marcellus, have seen the ghost of the recently dead King Hamlet on the
battlements of the castle. They come to tell the prince their news. Hamlet has been brooding on his father's
death and is thus receptive to their words. He questions them closely about the apparition:

HAMLET. . . Hold you the watch tonight? MARCELLUS AND BERNARDO We do my
lord. HAMLET Armed say you? . . . MARCELLUS AND BERNARDO My lord, from head to
foot . . . HAMLET What, looked he frowningly? HORATIO A countenance more in sorrow
than in anger.

Quotes in Context: "More Matter With Less Art"

Context: Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, is informed by his dead father's ghost that he was murdered in his sleep
by his brother Claudius, the present Danish King, and that Hamlet's mother, Gertrude, was adulterous with
Claudius. Hamlet swears to avenge his father by murdering the well-guarded king. As a start, and hoping to
relax the king's guard, Hamlet pretends to be mad by behaving oddly in the presence of Ophelia, daughter of
the king's chief councilor, Polonius. Ophelia tells her father, and Polonius concludes that the prince is insane.
He hurries to report Hamlet's strange behavior to the royal couple. But he talks around the subject, is foolish,
and longwinded.

POLONIUS. . . Mad call I it, for to define true madness, What is't but to be nothing else but
mad? But let that go. GERTRUDE More matter with less art. POLONIUS Madam, I swear I use
no art at all. That he's mad 'tis true; 'tis true, 'tis pity, And pity 'tis 'tis true—a foolish figure, But
farewell it, for I will use no art. . .
Quotes in Context: "Neither A Borrower Nor A Lender Be"

Context: Minted by Shakespeare, this saying has, like many of his lines, achieved the status of a proverb. Specifically, Polonius, the chief councilor to King Claudius of Denmark, gives his son Laertes much advice as he bids him farewell just before the young man embarks from Elsinore for France. Polonius is rich in old saws and sage counsel, which the young man patiently hears.

POLONIUS. . .Neither a borrower nor a lender be,For loan oft loses both itself and friend,And borrowing dulleth edge of husbandry.. . .

Quotes in Context: "Not A Mouse Stirring"

Context: These words are perhaps more often remembered from their rearrangement in A Visit from St. Nicholas (1823) by Clement Clark Moore: "... Not a creature was stirring,—not even a mouse..." There can be little doubt, however, that Moore remembered his Shakespeare. As the opening scene of Hamlet begins late on a chilly night, Francisco is standing guard on the ramparts of the Danish castle of Elsinore. Another guard, Bernardo, comes to relieve him. As they identify each other in the murk, they are jumpy and nervous because an apparition resembling the late King Hamlet has appeared on the battlements the last two nights. They expect it to appear again, as they converse quietly.

BERNARDO'Tis now struck twelve, get thee to bed Francisco.FRANCISCOFor this relief much thanks, 'tis bitter cold,And I am sick at heart.BERNARDOHave you had quiet guard?FRANCISCONot a mouse stirring.BERNARDOWell, good night... .

Quotes in Context: "O That This Too Too Solid Flesh Would Melt"

Context: A combination of factors gives this opening line of Hamlet's first soliloquy great poignancy. His uncle Claudius, new King of Denmark, has just ascended the throne and announced his marriage to Hamlet's mother, Queen Gertrude. Hamlet, a sensitive, introspective person, is shattered by these events. Not only is his mother's hasty marriage unseemly and incestuous, not only does he dislike his uncle Claudius on personal terms, but also he now has even more reason to detest him because Claudius has usurped his rightful inheritance, the throne itself. Now Hamlet is alone. He feels drained, disgusted, miserable, and betrayed. His thoughts are on death. (Most scholars are now agreed that the line should read "sullied flesh," but "solid" is fixed in the popular memory.)

HAMLETO that this too too solid flesh would melt,Thaw and resolve itself into a dew,Or that the Everlasting had not fixedHis canon 'gainst self-slaughter. O God, God,How weary, stale, flat, and unprofitableSeem to me all the uses of this world!... .

Quotes in Context: "O What A Noble Mind Is Here O'erthrown!"

Context: Informed by his father's ghost that he, his father, was murdered by his brother, Claudius, and that his wife and Hamlet's mother Queen Gertrude, was adulterous with him, Hamlet's mind teeters. Horrified and distracted, he swears to avenge his father's death. But how? Claudius is well guarded. Hamlet pretends madness in Ophelia's presence. She, in love with Hamlet, reports his strange behavior to her father, Polonius,
chief councilor of the king. He in turn tells the king that Hamlet has lost his mind over love of Ophelia. The councilor and king determine to test Hamlet by putting Ophelia in his way. Hamlet is aware of the plot. He is angry at Ophelia for lending herself to duplicity, as did his mother, and he rails at her. The phrase "all but one" is for the hidden king's benefit.

HAMLET... I say we will have no moe marriage. Those that are married already, all but one, shall live, the rest shall keep as they are. To a nunnery go. [Exit.]OPHELIAO what a noble mind is here o'erthrown! The courtier's, soldier's, scholar's, eye, tongue, sword,. . .Th' observed of all observers, quite, quite down,. . .

Quotes in Context: "Observed Of All Observers"

Context: Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, charged by the Ghost of his murdered father with the duty of avenging the murder, senses the web of intrigue in the court. When Ophelia, daughter of Polonius, returns his love tokens, he sees her as a part of the conspiracy against him and brutally berates her. She can only believe that madness has overtaken her lover because of her rejection, and laments his condition.

OPHELIAO what a noble mind is here o'erthrown! The courtier's, soldier's, scholar's, eye, tongue, sword, Th' expectancy and rose of the fair state, The glass of fashion, and the mould of form, Th' observed of all observers, quite, quite down, And I of ladies most deject and wretched, That sucked the honey of his musicked vows, Now see that noble and most sovereign reason, Like sweet bells jangled, out of tune and harsh; That unmatched form and feature of blown youth Blasted with ecstasy. O woe is me! T' have seen what I save seen, see what I see.

Quotes in Context: "One May Smile, And Smile, And Be A Villain"

Context: The ghost of Denmark's late King Hamlet for three previous nights has been seen on the battlements of Elsinore Castle. The young Prince Hamlet, accompanied by friends, waits, tonight, to see and talk to the apparition. It appears, and Hamlet shakes off his protesting, fearful companions and follows where it beckons. In a deserted area at the foot of the battlements, the ghost reveals to Hamlet that he, his father, was murdered in his sleep by his brother, the present King Claudius, and that Hamlet's mother was adulterous with Claudius. The ghost demands revenge on his murderer. Hamlet, horrified and distracted, calms himself only after he writes his fearful and damnable discovery in his notebook. He remembers how Claudius smiled at him when he called him his son.

HAMLET... O villain, villain, smiling damned villain! My tables—meet it is I set it down That one may smile, and smile, and be a villain; At least I am sure it may be so in Denmark. [Writes.] So uncle, there you are. Now to my word; It is, adieu, adieu, remember me. I have sworn't.

Quotes in Context: "One Woe Doth Tread Upon Another's Heel"

Context: Ophelia is the daughter of Polonius, chief councilor of King Claudius of Denmark. She has some reason to believe Prince Hamlet loves her, but when she allows herself to be a tool of her father and the king, Hamlet turns on her. Shortly, Hamlet accidentally kills her father and is sent to England as a result. Ophelia
loses her mind. Laertes, her brother who has been in France, returns home to avenge his father's death and is talking with the king when Queen Gertrude brings them news of Ophelia's death.

GERTRUDEOne woe doth tread upon another's heel, So fast they follow; your sister's drowned, Laertes... .There is a willow grows askant the brook, There on the pendent boughs her coronet weed Clamb'ring to hang, an envious sliver broke, When down her weedy trophies and herself Fell in the weeping brook... .The idea of this quotation was expressed somewhat differently nearly half a century after Shakespeare when Robert Herrick wrote: "Thus woe succeeds a woe, as wave a wave" in Sorrows Succeed (1648). Edward Young, in Night Thoughts (1742-1745), returned to Shakespeare's image: Woes cluster; rare are solitary woes; They love a train, they tread each other's heel.

Quotes in Context: "Rich, Not Gaudy"

Context: This pithy saying is usually heard as "rich but not gaudy" and implies the person or thing referred to has or reflects good taste and quiet costliness, or an avoidance of the earmarks of a parvenu. In a letter to his friend William Wordsworth in 1806, Charles Lamb coined the phrase, "neat, not gaudy" which conveys the same sense of discrimination but in a slightly modified form. It does not imply wealth or riches in the connotation. In Hamlet, Polonius, the chief councilor to King Claudius of Denmark, bids his son Laertes farewell just before the young man embarks from Elsinore for France. The father continues at length, with much advice:

POLONIUS... .Beware Of entrance to a quarrel, but being in, Bear't that th' opposed may beware of thee. Give every man thy ear, but few thy voice; Take each man's censure, but reserve thy judgement. Costly thy habit as thy purse can buy, But not expressed in fancy; rich, not gaudy, For the apparel oft proclaims the man; . . .

Quotes in Context: "Shuffled Off This Mortal Coil"

Context: Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, urged by the Ghost of his murdered father to take revenge against the murderer, his uncle and father's brother, considers his course of action. A meditative rather than an active man, he weighs the delight of suicide against the consequences of the act after the earthly body has been uncoiled from about the immortal part of man. The word "coil" also meant "bustle" or "turmoil" in Shakespeare's day.

HAMLETTo be, or not to be, that is the question—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. To die, to sleep—No more; and by a sleep to say we end The heart-ache, and the thousand natural shocks That flesh is heir to; 'tis a consummation Devoutly to be wished. To die, to sleep—To sleep, perchance to dream, ay there's the rub, For in that sleep of death what dreams may come When we have shuffled off this mortal coil, Must give us pause; there's the respect That makes calamity of so long life. . . .

Quotes in Context: "Something Is Rotten In Denmark"

Context: This famous saying is universally known in the English-speaking world. It connotes the suspicion that all is not as it appears in a given situation; that something, indefinite and vague, is disturbingly amiss. The colloquialisms "something smells," "it stinks," and the like are probably logical derivations from Shakespeare's line. In the play, the ghost of Denmark's late King Hamlet has been seen three successive nights
on the battlements of Elsinore Castle. The most recent visitation, the night before, was witnessed by Horatio, good friend of the late king's son, Prince Hamlet. Now, late the following night, Hamlet is on the ramparts with his friend and an officer, Marcellus, when the ghost materializes. The ghost refuses to speak but beckons Hamlet to follow it. Despite the strenuous objections of his friends, Hamlet does so.

HORATIOHave after. To what issue will this come?MARCELLUSSomething is rotten in the state of Denmark.HORATIOHeaven will direct it.MARCELLUSNay let's follow him.

Quotes in Context: "Springs To Catch Woodcocks!"

Context: In Scene Two, Hamlet learns that his father's ghost has appeared at Elsinore. In Scene Four, he encounters the ghost. Between these highly charged passages, there is an interlude of semi-comic sententiousness. Laertes, son of the ancient Lord Chamberlain, Polonius, is about to embark for Paris, but first warns his sister, Ophelia, against taking Hamlet's protestations of love too seriously: "Hold it a fashion, and a toy in blood." Polonius picks up the theme and, despite Ophelia's protestations, insists that Hamlet's love vows are snares—"springs"—to catch woodcocks like Ophelia, the woodcock being so proverbially foolish a bird that it was sometimes supposed to have no brains at all:

OPHELIAMy lord, he hath importun'd me with loveIn honourable fashion.POLONIUSAy, fashion you may call it; go to, go to.OPHELIAAnd hath given countenance to his speech, my lord,With almost all the holy vows of heaven.POLONIUSAy, springs to catch woodcocks. I do know,When the blood burns, how prodigal the soulLends the tongue vows. These blazes daughter,Giving more light than heat, extinct in both,Even in their promise, as it is a-making,You must not take for fire. From this timeBe something scanter of your maiden presence... . .OPHELIAI shall obey, my lord.

Quotes in Context: "Suit The Action To The Word"

Context: Prince Hamlet of Denmark learns that his father was murdered by Claudius, his father's brother, who is now king. Hamlet, horrified and distracted by this news, swears to avenge his father's murder. But before he does so, he must confirm the new king's guilt. When a band of players comes to Elsinore Castle, he arranges for the actors to play before his uncle a scene like the murder of his father. The king's reactions will indicate his guilt or innocence. Now, he gives the players last-minute instructions:

HAMLETSpeak the speech I pray you as I pronounced it to you, trippingly on the tongue; . . .FIRST PLAYERN't warrant your honour.HAMLETBe not too tame neither, but let your own discretion be your tutor. Suit the action to the word, the word to the action, . . . For anything . . . o'erdone is from the purpose of playing, whose end both at the first, and now, was and is, to hold, as 'twere the mirror up to nature; to show virtue her own feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure. . . .

Quotes in Context: "Sweet Bells Jangled Out Of Tune"

Context: Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, is in profound melancholia over the sudden death of his father, King Hamlet, and the hasty marriage of his mother to Claudius, brother of the late king and usurper of the crown. In an interview with his father's ghost, the prince learns that the king's death was not a natural one, but that he was murdered by Claudius. The ghost makes Hamlet swear to avenge this "foul and most unnatural murder." In order to protect himself against suspicion while planning his revenge, Hamlet feigns madness. Claudius suspects that the madness is not genuine but has no proof. Polonius, Lord Chamberlain, is convinced that the
prince's insanity is real and is caused by unrequited love for his daughter, Ophelia, to whom Hamlet has paid court. In order to prove his point, he suggests that he and Claudius, hidden behind a tapestry, spy on an interview between the two lovers. Hamlet, knowing that he and Ophelia are being overheard and furious with her for lying to him by saying that her father is at home, treats her brutally; so that when he has left the stage, the bewildered young girl, who believes that he is really mad, gives in a soliloquy a description of the prince as he was before the death of his father.

OPHELIA: What a noble mind is here o'erthrown! The courtier's, soldier's, scholar's, eye, tongue, sword, Th' expectancy and rose of the fair state, The glass of fashion, and the mould of form, Th' observed of all observers, quite, quite down, And I of ladies most deject and wretched, That sucked the honey of his musicked vows, Now see that noble and most sovereign reason, Like sweet bells jangled, out of tune and harsh; That unmatched form and feature of blown youth Blasted with ecstasy. O woe is me! 'T' have seen what I have seen, see what I see.

Quotes in Context: "Sweets To The Sweet"

Context: Ophelia, daughter of Polonius, the late chief councilor of King Claudius of Denmark, and who was once the beloved of Prince Hamlet, lost her senses after her father was killed. Shortly, she drowned accidentally, and now is being buried in a churchyard near Elsinore Castle. Her body is laid in the grave, and Queen Gertrude comes to the graveside to say farewell.

GERTRUDE: Sweets to the sweet. Farewell. [Scatters flowers.] I hoped thou shouldst have been my Hamlet's wife. I thought thy bride-bed to have decked, sweet maid, And not have strewed thy grave.

Quotes in Context: "The Apparel Oft Proclaims The Man"

Context: With much fatherly advice, Polonius, Lord Chamberlain in the court of Denmark and a tedious old man, sends his son Laertes, returned to Denmark for the coronation of the king, back to Paris, where he has been in school. The main body of the speech follows:

POLONIUS: . . . There--my blessing with thee. And these few precepts in thy memory Look thou character. Give thy thoughts no tongue, Nor any unproportioned thought his act. Be thou familiar, but by no means vulgar. . . . Give every man thy ear, but few thy voice; Take each man's censure, but reserve thy judgement. Costly thy habit as thy purse can buy, But not expressed in fancy; rich, not gaudy, For the apparel oft proclaims the man; And they in France of the best rank and station, Or of the most select and generous, chief in that. . . . This above all, to thine own self be true, And it must follow, as the night the day, Thou canst not then be false to any man. Farewell, my blessing season this in thee.

Quotes in Context: "The Glass Of Fashion"

Context: Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, in the position of having to avenge the death of his murdered father, feels himself oppressed by the whole court. Even Ophelia, his love, seems to be a part of the plot against him. Consequently, he berates her in such a vicious manner that when he leaves she can only think that he, the very mirror of the ideal, is mad. Her description of Hamlet as he was before the death of his father is the picture of the idealized Renaissance Prince.
OPHELIAO what a noble mind is here o'erthrown! The courtier's, soldier's, scholar's, eye, tongue, sword, Th' expectancy and rose of the fair state, The glass of fashion, and the mould of form, The observed of all observers, quite, quite down, And I of ladies most deject and wretched, That sucked the honey of his musicked vows, Now see that noble and most sovereign reason, Like sweet bells jangled, out of tune and harsh; That unmatched form and feature of blown youth Blasted with ecstasy. O woe is me! I have seen what I have seen, see what I see.

Quotes in Context: "The Lady Doth Protest Too Much Methinks"

Context: Sometimes heard as "methinks the lady doth protest too much" or "methinks thou protest too much," this saying is used whenever anyone is suspected of camouflaging an ulterior purpose behind effusive protestation or denial. In the play, Prince Hamlet of Denmark learns that his father was murdered by Claudius, his father's brother, who is now king. Hamlet swears to avenge his father's murder. But first he must confirm the new king's guilt by having a band of players play before his uncle a scene like the murder of his father. How his uncle reacts, not knowing he is observed, will indicate his guilty or innocent conscience. Royalty and courtiers assemble and the play begins. The Player Queen affirms, reaffirms, and vows that she will love none but her first husband. Queen Gertrude, watching, is unaware that she too is being tested for guilt or innocence.

HAMLETIf she should break it now! . . . Madam, how like you this play? GERTRUDE The lady doth protest too much methinks. HAMLETO but she'll keep her word.

Quotes in Context: "The Memory Be Green"

Context: The sense of this saying, more often conveyed as "fresh in memory" or "the memory is fresh," is quite current. Thomas Moore, the famous Irish poet, used a similar phrase in Stanza 2 of his poem Oh Breathe Not His Name (published in Irish Melodies, 1807-1834): And the tear that we shed, though in secret it rolls, Shall long keep his memory green in our souls. In Hamlet, the newly crowned King Claudius of Denmark, brother and secret murderer of the dead King Hamlet, announces to the court his marriage to the late king's widow, Gertrude. By using this phrase, Claudius is acknowledging the brevity of the mourning period for the dead king, and then tries to explain it away.

CLAUDIUSThough 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, Yet so far hath discretion fought with nature That we with wisest sorrow think on him, Together with remembrance of ourselves... .

Quotes in Context: "The Morn In Russet Mantle Clad"

Context: The opening scene of Hamlet occurs on the ramparts of the Danish castle of Elsinore. The guard is changed at midnight and, by prearrangement, the relieving officer, Bernardo, is joined by fellow officer Marcellus and Horatio, a friend of young Prince Hamlet. Horatio is present to confirm a report of a ghost which has appeared twice previously on the battlements. Horatio is skeptical of the reports, but soon the apparition appears and is recognized as the ghost of the dead King Hamlet. It will not stay or speak at Horatio's demand but disappears. The three men discuss the unsettled conditions in the kingdom since King Hamlet died and decide the appearance of his ghost is an omen of evil. The ghost reappears, is about to speak, when, at the crow of a cock, he once more vanishes. Following a subdued discussion of it, the worried Horatio realizes day is dawning.
HORATIO. . .But look the morn in russet mantle cladWalks o'er the dew of yon high eastward hill.Break we our watch up, and by my adviceLet us impart what we have seen to-nightUnto young Hamlet, for upon my lifeThis spirit dumb to us will speak to him. . . .

Quotes in Context: "The Play's The Thing"

Context: The ghost of Hamlet, late King of Denmark, has appeared on the battlements of Elsinore Castle to inform his son, Prince Hamlet, that he was murdered by his brother, Claudius, who has since married the widowed Queen Gertrude and usurped the crown. The ghost makes his son swear to avenge his murder, a vow that young Hamlet willingly takes. But after this emotion-charged scene is over, the Prince is assailed by doubts: is the ghost really that of his father or is it the Devil who has assumed his shape? He must have further evidence before he proceeds with his vengeance. Luckily, a troupe of strolling players stops at the castle. Quickly young Hamlet plans to have them produce a tragedy, the story of which resembles the Ghost's description of the murder. The reaction of Claudius to the play will demonstrate whether he is guilty or innocent, and then Hamlet will know what to do. In his soliloquy the Prince says:

. . . the devil hath power'T assume a pleasing shape; yea, and perhapsOut of my weakness and my melancholy,As he is very potent with such spirits,Abuses me to damn me: I'll have groundsMore relative than this: the play's the thingWherein I'll catch the conscience of the king.

Quotes in Context: "The Proverb Is Something Musty"

Context: Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, friends of Hamlet's youth, have, at the request of the king and queen, made one unsuccessful attempt to discover the cause of Hamlet's "distemper." Now that Hamlet has, by watching King Claudius' reaction to a play within the play, satisfied himself that Claudius did indeed kill his father (though only Hamlet and his friend, Horatio, know of the king's guilt), Rosencrantz and Guildenstern make another attempt, which is again fended off by Hamlet's turning the conversation to the fact that his uncle was given the throne rather than he. Rosencrantz reminds him that Claudius has already suggested Hamlet as his heir, whereupon Hamlet, playing with fire, but scarcely caring at this point, recalls an old proverb, "While the grass is growing, the horse starves," implying that he is hungry for the throne:

ROSENCRANTZGood my lord, what is the cause of your distemper? You do surely bar the door upon your own liberty, if you deny your griefs to your friend.HAMLETSir, I lack advancement.ROSENCRANTZHow can that be, when you have the voice of the King himself for your succession in Denmark?HAMLETAy, sir, but while the grass grows–the proverb is something musty.

Quotes in Context: "The Rest Is Silence"

Context: With Queen Gertrude, King Claudius, and Laertes victims of violent deaths in the last scene of the play, Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, fatally wounded, passes the rights of the throne of Denmark to Fortinbras, Prince of Norway, who has a claim to the throne. All matters being settled, Hamlet speaks his last line and dies. Horatio bids him farewell.

HAMLETO I die Horatio,The potent poison quite o'er-crows my spirit.I cannot live to hear the news from England,But I do prophesy th' election lightsOn Fortinbras, he has my dying voice;So tell him, with th' occurrences more and lessWhich have solicited–the rest is silence.[Dies.]HORATIONow cracks a noble heart. Good night sweet Prince,And flights of angels
Quotes in Context: "The Time Is Out Of Joint"

Context: On the battlements of the Castle of Elsinore, young Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, has just encountered the ghost of his father, the late King, who has told him the terrible story of his murder by his brother, Claudius. Furthermore, the murderer has usurped the crown of Denmark and has married the widowed Queen Gertrude, Hamlet's mother. The marriage was not only performed with unseemly haste but was incestuous. These crimes young Hamlet has promised to avenge. Quickly forming his plans, he tells his friends, who also have seen the ghost, that he will pretend madness in order to hide from Claudius his real intentions. He then demands that his friends swear on his sword to keep his pretense a secret. They swear and all prepare to leave the battlements. His final remark refers to his grief at having the terrible duty of revenge thrust upon him.

Rest, rest perturbed spirit! So, gentlemen, With all my love I do commend me to you... . . . . Let us go in together; And still your fingers on your lips, I pray. The time is out of joint: O cursed spite, That ever I was born to set it right!

Quotes in Context: "The Undiscovered Country, From Whose Bourn No Traveller Returns"

Context: In a mistaken attempt to prove that Hamlet's assumed madness is the result of love for his daughter, Ophelia, Polonius has placed her in Hamlet's path while Polonius and King Claudius hide themselves and listen. Hamlet enters and delivers the most famous speech in the entire Shakespearian canon, a discourse on the merits of life and death, life seen as a "sea of troubles," man as groaning under burdens—"fardels." Death would be preferable if only one could be certain that it involved nothing more than sleep, but death is for the living an unexplored country, and fear of it forces one to put up with the calamity of life:

To be, or not to be, that is the question—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. To die, to sleep—No more; and by a sleep to say we end The heart-ache, and the thousand natural shocks That flesh is heir to; 'tis a consummation Devoutly to be wish'd. To die, to sleep—To sleep, perchance to dream, ay there's the rub, For in that sleep of death what dreams may come When we have shuffled off this mortal coil, Must give us pause; there's the respect That makes calamity of so long life. For who would bear the whips and scorns of time, Th' oppressor's wrong, the proud man's contumely, The pangs of despised love, the law's delay, The insolence of office, and the spurns That patient merit of th' unworthy takes, When he himself might his quietus make With a bare bodkin? Who would fardels bear, To grunt and sweat under a weary life, But that the dread of something after death, The undiscovered country, from whose bourn No traveller returns, puzzles the will, And makes us rather bear those ills we have, Than fly to others that we know not of? . . .

Quotes in Context: "The Very Ecstasy Of Love"

Context: Polonius, Lord Chamberlain to King Claudius, has warned his daughter, Ophelia, not to waste her time in hearing the declared love of Hamlet, that she can only be hurt by what must be false attention. When the dutiful daughter rejects Hamlet, he bursts in on her as she is sewing in her closet. His action may be part of his pretended madness to entrap Claudius, but Polonius sees it only as madness for love of his daughter.
OPHELIA
He took me by the wrist, and held me hard; Then goes he to the length of all his arm, And with his other hand thus o'er his brow, He falls to such perusal of my face As 'a would draw it. . . . he lets me go, And with his head over his shoulder turned, He seemed to find his way without his eyes, For out a doors he went without their helps, And to the last bended their light on me.

POLONIUS
Come, go with me, I will go seek the King. This is the very ecstasy of love Whose violent property fordoes itself, And leads the will to desperate undertakings As oft as any passion under heaven That does afflict our natures.

Quotes in Context: "There Are More Things In Heaven And Earth, Horatio, Than Are Dreamt Of In Your Philosophy"

Context: Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, is led by Horatio and the guards to the part of Elsinore Castle where the prince confronts the Ghost of his father, murdered by Claudius, brother to the former king and now king himself. The Ghost explains the murder and demands vengeance through Hamlet. Shocked but determined not to reveal what he knows, Hamlet jests with Horatio and the guards and calls on them to swear that they will not tell of the happenings of the night.

HAMLET
. . . . Come hither gentlemen, And lay your hands again upon my sword. Swear by my sword, Never to speak of this that you have heard.

GHOST [beneath.]
Swear by his sword.

HAMLET
Well said old mole, canst work i' th' earth so fast? A worthy pioneer. Once more remove, good friends.

HORATIO
O day and night, but this is wondrous strange.

HAMLET
And therefore as a stranger give it welcome. There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, Than are dreamt of in your philosophy.

Quotes in Context: "There Is Nothing Either Good Or Bad But Thinking Makes It So"

Context: Prince Hamlet swears revenge for his father's murder. The murderer is Hamlet's uncle Claudius, his father's brother and present King of Denmark. To disarm his well-guarded uncle and to screen his own thoughts and actions, Hamlet pretends to be crazy. Polonius, the king's chief councilor, believes the prince to be mad and so reports to the king. The king is not convinced, however, and sets two young courtiers, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, erstwhile friends of Hamlet, to spy upon him and learn the truth.

HAMLET
. . . . What have you, my good friends, deserved at the hands of Fortune, that she sends you to prison hither? . . . Denmark's a prison.

ROSENCRANTZ
Then is the world one.

HAMLET
A goodly one, in which there are many confines, wards, and dungeons, Denmark being one o' th' worst.

ROSENCRANTZ
We think not so my lord.

HAMLET
Why then 'tis none to you; for there is nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it so. To me it is a prison.

Quotes in Context: "There's A Divinity That Shapes Our Ends"

Context: Prince Hamlet of Denmark accidentally kills Polonius, the chief councilor of King Claudius, thinking him to be the king. The latter, alarmed, sends Hamlet to England, and plans to have him summarily executed upon his arrival. Now Hamlet, returned to Denmark, tells his friend, Horatio, of the premonition he experienced on board ship that allowed him to thwart this plot on his life.
HAMLETSir, in my heart there was a kind of fightingThat would not let me sleep:. . .Rashly–And praised be rashness for it; let us know,Our indiscretion sometime serves us wellWhen our deep plots do pall, and that should learn usThere's a divinity that shapes our ends,Rough-hew them how we will–HORATIOThat is most certain.

Quotes in Context: "There's Rosemary, That's For Remembrance"

Context: Ophelia is the daughter of Polonius, chief councilor of King Claudius of Denmark. Prince Hamlet, the king's nephew, has been behaving erratically. To determine if he is indeed mad, she allows herself to be used by her father and the king as a decoy. Hamlet sees through the device and turns on her. She, who believed he loved her, is unsettled. Shortly afterwards, her father is killed accidentally by Hamlet, who is then sent to England. This event proves too great a blow, and she loses her mind. Later, her brother, who has had news of his father's death, returns to Elsinore Castle from France. He, Queen Gertrude, and the king witness Ophelia's mad behavior. She speaks to Laertes without recognizing him and gives him a sprig of flowers from her hair.

OPHELIA [to Laertes] There's rosemary, that's for remembrance–pray you love, remember–and there is pansies, that's for thoughts.LAERTESA document in madness, thoughts and remembrance fitted.OPHELIA [To Claudius.] There's fennel for you, and columbines. [To Gertrude.] There's rue for you, and here's some for me; . . .

Quotes in Context: "There's Such Divinity Doth Hedge A King"

Context: Hamlet has mistakenly killed the Lord Chamberlain, Polonius. Polonius' son, Laertes, knowing little of the circumstances of his father's death, but lusting for revenge, comes roaring back from France to Denmark, and leads a mob to the castle. There he is faced down by King Claudius, who asserts that "divine right" will throw a hedge of safety around him. The idea, of course, is a commonplace. In the play it serves to show Claudius as the shrewd and brave man he is, a worthy opponent to Hamlet. It also is ironic, for "divine right" has, in this case, descended to a murderer and an adulterer, who seeks Hamlet's death and who shortly makes Laertes an accomplice to his plan for the slaying of Hamlet:

KING What is the cause, Laertes, That thy rebellion looks so giant-like? Let him go Gertrude, do not fear our person. There's such divinity doth hedge a king That treason can but peep to what it would, Act little of his will. Tell me Laertes, Why thou art thus incensed–let him go, Gertrude–Speak man.

Quotes in Context: "To Be, Or Not To Be: That Is The Question"

Context: Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, has learned from the Ghost of his father the terrible story of the latter's murder by his brother, Claudius, who has usurped the crown and married the murdered King's widow, Hamlet's mother. The Ghost has made Hamlet swear to avenge the crime, and Hamlet has undertaken to assassinate Claudius. But now, conscious of the terrible duty that he, a scholar rather than a man of action, has taken upon himself, he muses on the possibility of suicide as an escape from his task. Is it better to endure quietly what fortune brings or to contend against it? Or is it better still to end one's life and thus to evade the
problem altogether? The famous soliloquy begins:

To be, or not to be: that is the question:Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to sufferThe slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,And by opposing end them? To die: to sleep. . . .

Quotes in Context: "To Hold The Mirror Up To Nature"

Context: Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, urged by the Ghost of his dead father to avenge his murder, is uncertain of the nature of the Ghost. To determine whether the Ghost is good or evil and whether it tells the truth of his father's death at the hands of King Claudius, he plans to insert into a play a few lines which will indicate, by the reaction of Claudius, the guilt or innocence of the accused. In his famous speech to the actors, Hamlet (and Shakespeare) directs them in the method of acting:

Be not too tame neither, but let your own discretion be your tutor. Suit the action to the word, the word to the action, with this special observance, that you o'erstep not the modesty of nature. For anything so o'erdone is from the purpose of playing, whose end both at the first, and now, was and is, to hold as 'twere the mirror up to nature; to show virtue her own feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure. . . .

Quotes in Context: "To Put An Antic Disposition On"

Context: Claudius, Denmark's new king, is a usurper, for the throne should have been Hamlet's by right of succession. Recently, the latter has seen and talked to the ghost of his dead father on the battlements of Elsinore Castle. The ghost tells him that Claudius murdered him, his father, in his sleep, and that his mother was adulterous with the murderer. As a result, Hamlet swears vengeance on Claudius. After his initial shock, Hamlet realizes he must swear his companions to silence, and he also must establish some readymade excuse for any future peculiar behavior on his part. He fears he may truly go mad, or, if not, he may well feign madness to accomplish his pledge of revenge against the well-guarded Claudius.

HAMLET. . .But come--Here as before, never, so help you mercy,How strange or odd some'er I bear myself--As perchance hereafter shall think meetTo put an antic disposition on--That you at such times seeing me never shall,With arms encumbered thus, or this head-shake,Or by pronouncing of some doubtful phrase,. . .Or such ambiguous giving out, to noteThat you know aught of me--this do swear,. . .

Quotes in Context: "To The Manner Born"

Context: This saying has, by usage, become associated with good society, and is used to explain any distinction or striking discrimination in behavior. Although here "manner" means "custom" or "behavior," the saying is sometimes given as "to the manor born," which implies definite association with wealth, class distinction, or gentility. The difference is not readily discernible in speech, since the two words sound identical and the context probably has a double sense—a play on the two words, as Shakespeare was fond of doing. In Hamlet, the prince and Horatio, while waiting late at night for the ghost of Hamlet's father to appear on the battlements, hear trumpet flourishes and peels of cannon. Hamlet explains to Horatio that, the new king, Claudius, is indulging in a drinking bout, and each toast the king proposes is celebrated thus noisily. Horatio asks:
HORATIO: Is it a custom? HAMLET: Ay marry is't, but to my mind, though I am native here, and to the manner born, it is a custom more honoured in the breach than the observance.

Quotes in Context: "To Thine Own Self Be True"

Context: Of all the lines in a great and famous speech from Hamlet, the line beginning "This above all" is perhaps the most commonly recalled and used. The opening phrase is employed widely in itself, to convey the sense of "this is most important" or "be sure to remember (or) do this" and is also contracted to simply "above all." It is, in addition, quoted widely with the remainder of the line of which it is a part—"This above all, to thine own self be true," which has entered the English language as a proverb. In Hamlet, Polonius, chief councilor of Denmark's King Claudius, gives his son Laertes much sage advice as the latter patiently waits for his father's farewell and blessing before he embarks from Elsinore for France.

POLONIUS: . . . This above all, to thine own self be true, and it must follow, as the night the day, thou canst not then be false to any man. Farewell, my blessing season this in thee. LAERTES: Most humbly do I take my leave my lord.

POLONIUS: The time invites you; go, your servants tend.

Quotes in Context: "Too Much Of Water Hast Thou, Poor Ophelia"

Context: Ophelia has gone mad—in contrast to Hamlet's feigning madness—upon learning that her former lover, Hamlet, has mistakenly slain her father, Polonius. Her brother, Laertes, and Hamlet's uncle, King Claudius, have just plotted the death of Hamlet (Laertes, because he wishes to revenge the death of his father; Claudius, because, with the death of Hamlet's father on his conscience, he fears the son) when news is brought of the drowning of Ophelia. According to the queen, Ophelia fell into a stream while hanging garlands on a willow tree: "Her clothes spread wide,/ And mermaid-like awhile they bore her up, / Which time she chaunted snatches of old tunes, / as one incapable of her own distress,/ . . . but long it could not be. . . ." Momentarily, the news of Ophelia's death by water puts out—drowns—the fires of Laertes' fierce resolution, and he rushes from the stage in tears, although, he promises, afterward the tearful woman in him will be gone and he will be ready to take his revenge:

LAERTEST: Too much of water hast thou poor Ophelia, and therefore I forbid my tears; but yet it is our trick, nature her custom holds, let shame say what it will; when these are gone, the woman will be out. Adieu my lord. I have a speech of fire that fain would blaze, but that this folly drowns it.

Quotes in Context: "What A Piece Of Work Is A Man"

Context: Hamlet, shocked by his kingly father's death and his mother's hasty marriage to his uncle, who, so the Ghost of his father informs him, has murdered the noble king, broods about the court. Alarmed over Hamlet's suspicious behavior, his uncle Claudius sends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, former friends of Hamlet, to seek out the reason for the prince's melancholy. Hamlet fends off their entreaties, delivers his estimate of the world and mankind, and comments on his own feelings.

HAMLET: . . . I have of late, but wherefore I know not, lost all my mirth, forgone all custom of exercises; and indeed it goes so heavily with my disposition, that this goodly frame the earth, seems to me a sterile promontory, this most excellent canopy the air, look you, this
brave o'erhanging firmament, this majestical roof fretted with golden fire, why, it appeareth nothing to me but a foul and pestilent congregation of vapours. What a piece of work is a man, how noble in reason, how infinite in faculties, in form and moving, how express and admirable in action, how like an angel in apprehension, how like a god–the beauty of the world; the paragon of animals; and yet to me, what is this quintessence of dust? Man delights not me; . . .

Quotes in Context: "What, Frighted With False Fire!"

Context: Hamlet has devised a stratagem to determine finally whether the Ghost who has appeared to him is really his father's spirit or a tempting demon. He has asked a group of traveling actors to perform a play, The Murther of Gonzago, in which he will insert some lines, the performance closely paralleling the story of his father's murder as told him by the Ghost: "The play's the thing/ Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the King," Hamlet asserts at the close of Act II. During the performance itself, Hamlet speaks of the play as "The Mousetrap." When one of the actors pours poison into the ears of another who is asleep—the way, according to the Ghost, that Claudius killed Hamlet's father–Claudius reacts, rising and leaving the throneroom. His conscience has been caught, and Hamlet is now convinced. Hamlet's first, quite characteristic, comment is ironic: can the king be so overwrought by a mere play, by "false fire," the discharge of a gun loaded with powder only?

OPHELIA The King rises. HAMLET What, frightened with false fire! GERTRUDE How fares my lord? POLONIUS Give o'er the play. KING Give me some light–Away!

Quotes in Context: "When Sorrows Come, They Come In Battalions"

Context: Ophelia is the daughter of Polonius, chief councilor to King Claudius of Denmark. Her brother Laertes is abroad. To determine if Prince Hamlet, the King's nephew, who has been behaving erratically, is indeed mad, she allows herself to be used by her father and the king as a plant. Hamlet sees through the device and turns on her. She, who believed he loved her, is unsettled. Shortly after this event, her father is killed accidentally by Hamlet, who is then sent to England. This death is too much for Ophelia. With Laertes absent, and with no one to turn to for support, she loses her mind. King Claudius and Queen Gertrude witness her mad behavior; then Claudius turns to Gertrude, saying

CLAUDIUS O this is the poison of deep grief, it springs All from her father's death. And now behold, O Gertrude, Gertrude–When sorrows come, they come not single spies, But in battalions. . . .

Quotes in Context: "Yeoman's Service"

Context: Prince Hamlet of Denmark accidentally slays Polonius, chief councilor of King Claudius, thinking him to be the king. Claudius, alarmed, sends Hamlet to England and plots to have him executed upon his arrival. One night on board ship en route to England, Hamlet cannot sleep. He has a premonition of evil. He rises in the dark, goes to the cabin of his traveling companions who know the king's intent, and steals their royal commission to deliver him to death. Hamlet returns to his own cabin and prepares a fake commission, consigning his false companions to that death. He tells Horatio how he performed the trick.

HAMLET Being thus benetted round with villainies—. . . I sat me down, Devised a new commission, wrote it fair—I once did hold it as our statists do, A baseness to write fair, and
Quotes in Context: "You Come Most Carefully Upon Your Hour"

Context: Twice the ghost of Hamlet's father has appeared an hour past midnight before the castle at Elsinore. He will, however, not speak to the guardsmen, who have invited Hamlet's friend, the scholar Horatio, "to watch the minutes of this night." Horatio, we learn shortly, is rather skeptical of the story, an attitude that contrasts sharply with his reaction to the arrival of the Ghost: "It harrows me with fear and wonder." Leading up to the appearance of the Ghost, Shakespeare carefully creates a mood of anticipation and suspense out of the changing of the guard. The sentinel Francisco is delighted to leave. His replacement, Bernardo, wishes that Horatio and the soldier Marcellus, who will be "rivals," partners, of his watch, would arrive:

BERNARDO Who's there? FRANCISCO Nay, answer me. Stand and unfold your self. BERNARDO Long live the king. FRANCISCO Bernardo? BERNARDO He. FRANCISCO You come most carefully upon your hour. BERNARDO Tis now struck twelve, get thee to bed Francisco. FRANCISCO For this relief much thanks, 'tis bitter cold, And I am sick at heart. . . . BERNARDO Well, good night, If you do meet Horatio and Marcellus, The rivals of my watch, bid them make haste.

Quotes in Context: "You Would Pluck Out The Heart Of My Mystery"

Context: Prince Hamlet learns that his father was murdered by his father's brother Claudius, who is now king, and that his mother, Queen Gertrude, was adulterous with him. Hamlet swears to avenge his father's murder. First he must confirm his uncle's guilt. Hamlet arranges to have some actors play a scene like the murder of his father before Claudius and the court. Claudius betrays his guilt when he abruptly stops the play and leaves the hall, followed by his startled and confused court. Both Claudius and Gertrude are conscience-stricken and disturbed by the play. Now Gertrude sends two courtiers, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, to summon Hamlet to her chamber. Hamlet has only contempt for these false friends. He snatches up a recorder from a passing musician.

HAMLET . . . Will you play upon this pipe? It is as easy as lying; . . . these are the stops. GUILDENSTERN But these cannot I command to any utterance of harmony; I have not the skill. HAMLET Why look you now how unworthy a thing you make of me. You would play upon me, you would seem to know my stops, you would pluck out the heart of my mystery, you would sound me. . . .

Character and Theme Quotes: Essential Passage by Character: Hamlet

HAMLET:

O, that this too too sullied flesh would melt,

Thaw and resolve itself into a dew,
Or that the Everlasting had not fix'd  
His canon 'gainst self-slaughter! O God! God!  
How weary, stale, flat and unprofitable  
Seem to me all the uses of this world!  
Fie on't! ah, fie! 'tis an unweeded garden  
That grows to seed; things rank and gross in nature  
Possess it merely. That it should come to this!  
But two months dead! Nay, not so much, not two;  
So excellent a king, that was, to this,  
Hyperion to a satyr; so loving to my mother  
That he might not beteem the winds of heaven  
Visit her face too roughly. Heaven and earth!  
Must I remember? Why, she would hang on him  
As if increase of appetite had grown  
By what it fed on; and yet, within a month—  
Let me not think on't! Frailty, thy name is woman—  
A little month, or ere those shoes were old  
With which she follow'd my poor father's body  
Like Niobe, all tears—why she, even she—  
O God! a beast that wants discourse of reason  
Would have mourn'd longer—married with my uncle,  
My father's brother, but no more like my father  
Than I to Hercules. Within a month,  
Ere yet the salt of most unrighteous tears  
Had left the flushing in her galled eyes,  
She married. O, most wicked speed, to post
With such dexterity to incestuous sheets!

It is not, nor it cannot come to, good.

But break, my heart, for I must hold my tongue!

*Act 1, Scene 2, Lines 132-162*

**Summary**

Hamlet, the prince of Denmark, is speaking to himself. He is saddened and disheartened by recent events: his father’s death and the marriage of his mother, Gertrude the queen, to his uncle Claudius. By marrying his mother, Claudius has become king and denies his nephew the right to the crown. But losing the kingship is not what upsets Hamlet. Rather, Hamlet is depressed and angry by his mother’s betrayal of the memory of his father (she has remarried in less than two months after his death). Moreover, Hamlet does not feel that his uncle is anything like his father as a ruler or a parent. Claudius, too, has betrayed Hamlet’s father by marrying Gertrude. Despite all of their treachery, however, Hamlet does not feel he can speak out against their poor behavior and decisions. Although it saddens him, he says, “I must hold my tongue.”

This soliloquy establishes how much Hamlet blames his mother for her actions and shows how much esteem Hamlet has for his now-dead father. Most important, it sets the tone for Hamlet’s indecision and mental anguish.

**Analysis**

The mental anguish Hamlet expresses in this soliloquy will be a feature of the entire play. King Hamlet was bold, decisive, and active. His son, on the other hand, is intellectual and passive. Hamlet clearly does not want to be involved in such a difficult situation. He even wishes that suicide were not a cardinal sin so that he could kill himself and be finished. Although his situation is not enviable, he spends a good deal of this soliloquy stomping his feet, like a spoiled child, and blaming his mother. While Gertrude is indeed guilty, Hamlet’s anger is motivated not only by her treachery but also because her behavior makes it all the harder for him to ignore his duty to avenge his father’s murder. His procrastination is nearly limitless.

Hamlet’s procrastination may be due in part to his not-very-realistic assessment of his position. His predicament requires a clear head and sound thinking, two areas in which Prince Hamlet falls sadly short. Hamlet’s desire to continue living in an imaginary world is evident in his fondness for mythology. In fact, he couches the whole scenario in overblown mythical terms. For example, while King Hamlet may have been a good ruler, Hamlet’s memory of him seems over-the-top. Even when Hamlet thinks of his parents in more realistic terms, he has a very naive perception of their relationship. He believes his father so doted on his mother that he would even prevent wind from blowing too harshly upon her face. But how could he really know the truth of their relationship? He was away much of the time, and Gertrude obviously did not love the former king the way Hamlet thinks that she did or she would never have become complicit in her husband’s murder and married his brother. He cannot even perceive of his mother as a feeling person who may have had desires of her own unmet by her former husband. In a later scene, he dismisses the notion that she may have been motivated by feelings of passion for Claudius, for Hamlet believes that a woman of her age is no longer capable of being a sexual person. This view of his mother is childish, and once again Hamlet proves that he is not mature enough to assume the crown.

Blaming others is a way to avoid action and responsibility. Readers certainly have some empathy for Hamlet, who is placed in an impossible position: he does not want to be king and he does not want to commit murder. But when Hamlet involves the innocent Ophelia, our empathy for the embattled prince decreases. In a
convoluted scheme to have Claudius confess his crimes, Hamlet decides that he will feign madness. In order to make his madness seem much more believable, he does not inform Ophelia of his deception, accusing her of the very crimes he feels his mother committed: deception and inconstancy. All of Hamlet’s negative perceptions of women are based in his belief that without a woman’s involvement, he would not be in the position of having to take action.

Hamlet even procrastinates when he is presented with a clear opportunity to kill Claudius later in Act 3. Hamlet comes upon Claudius alone at prayer. But intellectual Hamlet once again puts it off. He reasons that if he kills Claudius while the king is at confession, he will be forgiven and go to heaven. Hamlet decides it would be better to wait and catch Claudius doing something wrong so that he will go to hell. Ironically, Claudius felt unable to pray and Hamlet could have in (relatively) good conscience killed him then. Once again, Hamlet’s procrastination stays his hand, and this missed opportunity to kill one person will ultimately lead to the deaths of many.

**Character and Theme Quotes: Essential Passage by Character: Gertrude**

HAMLET:

Here is your husband, like a mildew’d ear

Blasting his wholesome brother. Have you eyes?

Could you on this fair mountain leave to feed,

And batten on this Moor? Ha! have you eyes?

You cannot call it love; for at your age

The heyday in the blood is tame, it's humble,

And waits upon the judgment; and what judgment

Would step from this to this? Sense sure you have,

Else could you not have motion; but sure that sense

Is apoplex'd; for madness would not err,

Nor sense to ecstasy was ne'er so thrall'd

But it reserv'd some quantity of choice

To serve in such a difference. What devil was't

That thus hath cozen'd you at hoodman-blind?

Eyes without feeling, feeling without sight,

Ears without hands or eyes, smelling sans all,
Or but a sickly part of one true sense
Could not so mope.

O shame! where is thy blush? Rebellious hell,
If thou canst mutine in a matron's bones,
To flaming youth let virtue be as wax
And melt in her own fire. Proclaim no shame
When the compulsive ardour gives the charge,
Since frost itself as actively doth burn,
And reason panders will.

**GERTRUDE:**

O Hamlet, speak no more!
Thou turn'st mine eyes into my very soul,
And there I see such black and grained spots
As will not leave their tinct.

*Act 3, Scene 4, Lines 70-98*

**Summary**

Gertrude has called Hamlet to her room, yet she is disturbed by his manic behavior. Hidden behind the arras is Polonius, trying to discover more of the cause of Hamlet’s madness. Yet, when Hamlet confronts his mother with her wickedness, Gertrude feels significantly threatened and cries out. Echoing her cry, Polonius reveals his hiding place and Hamlet, thinking that it was Claudius behind the arras, stabs and kills Polonius. Hamlet regrets his death, but he regrets that it was not Claudius even more.

Gertrude, in the face of ongoing judgment from Hamlet, asks her son what she has done to deserve his contempt. Thinking she is playing ignorant, Hamlet accuses her of an immoral marriage to her husband’s brother.

Hamlet points out to Gertrude two portraits of both her husbands. He compares them to each other, first taking note the excellent qualities of his own father. In contrast, he illuminates the wretchedness and wickedness of her second husband, Claudius. Using the Biblical allusion of the “mildewed ear / Blasting his wholesome brother” (from Genesis 41, in which the Pharaoh dreams of withered wheat consuming the wholesome wheat, prophesying the coming drought), Hamlet hints that all that was good about King Hamlet will be destroyed by King Claudius.

Hamlet questions the reason for her marriage. He states that, because she is middle-aged, it cannot be for love, for the passions have by now dried up in her. He notes that she has full use of her senses, but her senses seem
to have failed her. Perhaps it was a demon that tempted her to ignore her senses and enter into such a marriage. If so, then mere youth has no chance of virtue if the elders are so quickly drawn into sin.

Gertrude, overcome with this barrage of accusation, pleads with her son to stop. She tells him that he has turned her eyes around so that she is looking into her very soul. There she sees all the defects that he has pointed out, sins that cannot be washed away.

Analysis

Gertrude and Hamlet have one of the most problematic mother-son relationships in literature. The ongoing love-hate status propels the story in directions beyond the simple revenge story of Hamlet against Claudius. Conflicts with a stepfather are common, yet the implications that arise by the marriage of Gertrude to her husband’s brother present difficulties that further drive Hamlet to the brink of despair.

Gertrude had been the seemingly happily married wife of King Hamlet, as well as the doting mother of her son. The Ghost of Hamlet’s father relates his uxorious attentions to his wife, believing that she of all people would stay true to her husband, even after death. Yet, at his death, her “overhasty” marriage grieves him, causing doubt as to the true nature of her love during their marriage.

Hamlet, as the son of the former king and of the once-and-present queen, is likewise having severe moral issues concerning this marriage. His doubts arose even prior to his encounter with the Ghost. This visitation serves only to validate his outrage. It also impels him to take action, whereas before he was seemingly content to be sullen and withdrawn.

The legal implications, aside from the moral, present a different view. Despite Hamlet’s denouncement of this marriage as “incest,” in point of fact it is not, since Gertrude and Claudius are not blood relations. Though the legal restrictions on the marriage between a woman and her former brother-in-law are unclear, in many cultures, even modern ones, this does not present a particular problem. In ancient Jewish society, for example, the brother of a deceased man was expected to marry his widow in order to raise children for his line. Even in early America this practice was not uncommon. Once the woman became a widow, she was free to marry whom she chose, as long as he was not a close relation. Indeed, some cousins married, again in order to preserve the family line. Therefore, it is difficult to take a negative view concerning the legality of Gertrude's marriage to Claudius, either on a civil or moral ground.

In a society where the opportunities for women were almost nonexistent, marriage was the one security. Remarriage was common, especially if young children were involved. With the husband viewed as the sole breadwinner, it was necessary for the wife and family to be provided for. Thus Hamlet’s objections are shaky.

The implied cause of Hamlet's vilification of his mother is not on her choice of husbands, but on her choice of remarriage at all, especially so quickly. Hamlet’s near-worship of his father prevents any thought of anyone taking his place, either in the kingdom or in his mother’s bed. Yet his rage provides the play with an added foundation for revenge against Claudius: Hamlet is simply using Gertrude as another way to justify that revenge.

In confrontations with her son, Gertrude is confused about the virulence of the attacks. She cannot see his point of view, something that perhaps reflects negatively on her maternal nature. She has moved on from her first husband’s death and is determined to find happiness in her second. Unlike Hamlet, her heart is not in the grave. Despite Hamlet’s objections that, for a woman of her age, she is incapable of feeling passion, she indeed has displayed a deep love for Claudius. It was not a mere political marriage, though that may have been part of it, as a means of ensuring that Hamlet, at some point, would be heir to the throne. Yet Hamlet is not thinking of the future; he is concerned only with the past.
Hamlet’s words cause Gertrude some doubt as she reflects on her motives. Perhaps, as Hamlet says, she married too soon. How seriously she holds Hamlet’s words is shadowed by her belief that he is obviously mad. Though feeling remorse, Gertrude is more concerned at this point for her son’s sanity as well as for the safety of those with whom he comes in contact.

**Character and Theme Quotes: Essential Passage by Character: The Ghost**

**GHOST:**

I am thy father's spirit,
Doom’d for a certain term to walk the night,
And for the day confined to fast in fires,
Till the foul crimes done in my days of nature
Are burnt and purged away. But that I am forbid
To tell the secrets of my prison-house,
I could a tale unfold whose lightest word
Would harrow up thy soul, freeze thy young blood,
Make thy two eyes, like stars, start from their spheres,
Thy knotted and combined locks to part,
And each particular hair to stand an end
Like quills upon the fretful porpentine.
But this eternal blazon must not be
To ears of flesh and blood. List, list, O, list!
If thou didst ever thy dear father love—

**HAMLET:**

O God!

**GHOST:**

Revenge his foul and most unnatural murder.

**HAMLET:**
Murder?

GHOST:

Murder most foul, as in the best it is;

But this most foul, strange, and unnatural.

Act 1, Scene 5, Lines 13-32

Summary

Hamlet, Horatio, and Marcellus await the arrival of the Ghost of Hamlet’s father, while Claudius drinks the night away. Though it is customary in the palace to drink to the point of excessive drunkenness, Hamlet states that, though he is to this “manner born,” he does not indulge. There is too much evil in the world to willingly take more into his mouth to make what is customary become dishonorable. While Hamlet explains his position to Horatio and Marcellus, the Ghost appears, beckoning Hamlet to follow. Horatio and Marcellus try to hold Hamlet back, but Hamlet insists and goes off alone.

The Ghost proclaims that, before he is condemned to purgatory to be cleansed of his many sins, he has come to Hamlet to deliver a message. Though the Ghost would love to tell Hamlet of the pains he is to undergo in the afterlife, perhaps as a warning, he is forbidden to do so. Instead he begs Hamlet to avenge his murder.

The murder of his father is not something that Hamlet has brought himself consciously to acknowledge as a possibility, yet it has crossed his mind. To know it for a fact—as much as he has committed himself to trusting the words of the Ghost—is a shock. All murder is “foul,” but this act exceeds all others in its “most foul, strange, and unnatural” state.

Before he is condemned to suffer the eternal consequences of his misdeeds, the Ghost is bent on ensuring that the misdeeds of others have earthly consequences. It is thus that he appeals to Hamlet to carry out this duty. He says that his brother, Claudius, murdered him by pouring a poison into his ear while he slept in the garden. With the rightful king dead, Claudius then usurped the throne and married the recently widowed queen.

The Ghost speaks not only of his brother's betrayal but also that of his wife. That she would so quickly marry another, when she had appeared to be so in love with her husband, is an act of treason to the former king. Thus she also must pay for her guilt. It is through Hamlet that the Ghost will work for justice.

Analysis

Though Hamlet is typically presented as a play of revenge, as it indeed is, it could also be considered an exploration of the Biblical phrase “sins of the fathers” (Numbers 14:18). The former king was guilty of acts and deeds that may be considered “sins.” It is in the passage above that he freely admits so, although he does not go into detail concerning what “sins” they might have been. On the surface, he may simply be referring to those sins that all people, in their fallen state, commit. Yet he refers to his sins as “foul crimes,” so they are likely more than common, everyday transgressions.

As an absolute monarch, the king is the source of law, and thus he may bend it to his own will. Normally this would be done for the good of the state, as it may have been in the Ghost’s case. But it also may be done for one’s own personal benefit, as in the case of Claudius. It is in this argument that Shakespeare is making a judgment call as to who is the greater “sinner.”
During his reign, King Hamlet was attacked by King Fortinbras of Norway. In this conflict, King Hamlet killed Fortinbras, causing all the latter’s conquered lands to be ceded to Denmark. According to a bargain, some of these lands were to be given back to Fortinbras’s successor, yet this was not done. The son of Fortinbras, also called by that name, now is insisting that the lands be returned. The young Fortinbras, however, is in a weakened position because, like Hamlet, the throne of his country has been taken over by his uncle.

Through this situation, King Hamlet is guilty of dishonest dealings. Though the killing of Fortinbras might not be considered murder in the legal sense, as it was committed as an act of war, yet he did directly cause the death of another. As the king of Norway’s heir was denied the throne by an uncle, in an act of divine justice, the king of Denmark’s heir was also denied the throne. Rather than being an innocent victim of assassination, the Ghost was guilty of the civil turmoil in the state of Norway.

While this situation may be seen as merely the typical state of affairs between nations at war, it appears from this passage that, on a spiritual level, it requires purgation. On an eternal scale, the deeds of state do not condone the sins of man. There are eternal consequences for the acts of kings, just as there are for the acts of man. It is for these sins that Hamlet, the son of the king, must pay.

Although Hamlet may feel that he, and he alone, has suffered greatly because of the deeds of his uncle and his mother, the situation was instead caused by the sins of his father. Because of him, Hamlet must face retribution—not for his own sins as such, but for those of the king. Functioning like a Christ-figure, Hamlet must die for the sins of those who came before. While he too is not guiltless, especially in the murder of Polonius as well as in the madness and death of Ophelia, it is specifically for the “sins of the father” that he must die. Because of this substitutionary death, the succession to the throne of Denmark leaves the line of Hamlet to Fortinbras, who functions as a parallel to Hamlet. The death of the guilty—Claudius and Gertrude—and the death of the innocent purge sin from this “rotten state of Denmark.”

**Character and Theme Quotes: Essential Passage by Theme: Revenge**

**HAMLET:**

Now might I do it pat, now he is praying;

And now I'll do't. And so he goes to heaven,

And so am I revenged. That would be scann'd.

A villain kills my father; and for that,

I, his sole son, do this same villain send

To heaven.

O, this is hire and salary, not revenge!

He took my father grossly, full of bread,

With all his crimes broad blown, as flush as May;
And how his audit stands, who knows save heaven?

But in our circumstance and course of thought,
'tis heavy with him; and am I then revenged,
To take him in the purging of his soul,
When he is fit and seasoned for his passage?
No.

Up, sword, and know thou a more horrid hent.
When he is drunk asleep; or in his rage;
Or in the incestuous pleasure of his bed;
At game, a-swearing, or about some act
That has no relish of salvation in't
Then trip him, that his heels may kick at heaven,
And that his soul may be as damn'd and black
As hell, whereto it goes. My mother stays.

This physic but prolongs thy sickly days.

Act 3, Scene 3, Lines 75-98

Summary

Claudius has summoned Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, Hamlet’s childhood friends and fellow students, to take Hamlet to England, ostensibly for his own safety, as well as that of the kingdom. Rosencrantz points out that, though it is best for everyone to take measures to protect themselves, it is even more important for a king to do so, since so many people depend on him.

Polonius arrives, announcing that Hamlet is on his way to his mother’s room. Polonius will hide behind the arras to make sure that Gertrude stays strong. While a mother may successfully chide a child, she may also be too easily swayed.

Left alone, Claudius seems to genuinely feel remorse for his crimes. He compares himself to Cain, the murderer of his brother Abel. He wonders if he can be forgiven for a sin when he is still enjoying the fruits of that sin. Must he give up the fruits in order to achieve full forgiveness? He tries to pray, but he cannot. He acknowledges that, because of his unwillingness to give up his throne and his queen, he will most likely spend eternity in hell.

Hamlet enters and perceives Claudius in prayer. The opportunity to kill the king affords itself, yet Hamlet hesitates. Hamlet assumes that Claudius is confessing his sins to God. If he kills him in the act of prayer,
Claudius will go to heaven. Hamlet does not see this as the fullest act of revenge that he seeks. He does not see the logic of ending Claudius’s life simply to have him go on to eternal reward and bliss. Rather, he will wait until Claudius is caught in some act of sin: drunkenness, sex, or even swearing. He mocks the sufficiency of Claudius’s prayer. Although the king is trying to cure his sin, he is only prolonging his sinfulness.

**Analysis**

Hamlet is presented with quite the dilemma. An excellent opportunity to kill Claudius presents itself. Commanded by his late father to exact revenge on the king for his crimes against the royal family and the kingdom, Hamlet has committed himself to do exactly that. All actions that Hamlet has taken up to this point that, so it is unconscionable for Hamlet to refuse the chance to exact revenge when it is most available. He is decides to forgo this opportunity in hopes of a different one.

As presented in this passage, the distinction is made as to the true nature of Hamlet’s quest of revenge. It brings out the true definition of revenge, as just punishment for an unjust deed. The mere ending of Claudius’ life at this juncture would not accomplish sufficiently that punishment.

Revenge always has a strong tinge of justice threaded throughout. Mere lashing out in the heat of passion would not meet the full requirements. To do so would be akin to murder, which is not what Hamlet is about.

The ancient custom of “an eye for an eye” is involved in Hamlet’s call to revenge. One life has been taken away; therefore the life of the guilty party must be forfeited as well. But in the worldview from which Hamlet functions, the ending of a life is not the goal. It is justice. A crime has been committed, so there must be more than just earthly punishments involved. Claudius’s crime is murder and, in Hamlet’s mind, incest. These are not crimes against the laws of the state. They are crimes against the laws of God. Therefore, beyond just temporal punishment, there must be eternal punishment as well. If Hamlet kills Claudius in the act of confession, the king’s life will be ended, but he will receive no punishment in the hereafter. Thus, to kill Claudius now would be murder. Hamlet has decided: not only must Claudius die; Claudius must go to hell.

This dilemma showcases Hamlet’s extreme intelligence. He is guided not by his passions but by his mind. He is not a creature of action, as his previous indecision has revealed. Prior to his encounter with the ghost of his father, Hamlet’s attempts to reconcile himself to the death of his father and the remarriage of his mother purely on an intellectual basis, at which he was failing miserably. Such a situation cannot be understood with the mind. It goes against all that is logical in how a kingdom, and a family, is supposed to exist. Yet Hamlet cannot bring himself to take steps to rectify this situation, or even seek the help of advisers to bring Claudius to justice. It is what it is, and there is nothing to do but feel bad about it.

Yet when King Hamlet appears to his son, he prods Hamlet reluctantly to action. Hamlet accepts the task, yet he carries it out in an intellectual fashion. It becomes a cat-and-mouse game, signified by the play he has the acting troupe to perform, ”The Mousetrap.” All the cerebral talents of Hamlet come forth as he drives Claudius to the edge. While the Ghost might have been meaning a simple execution, Hamlet prefers to toy with Claudius’s mind. As an intellectual this is most appealing to him. But to take action and kill Claudius is contrary to his inactive nature. Thus he is reluctant at this point to do so, aside from the notion of sending him straight to heaven.

This raises some questions: Is Hamlet falling into evil? Is he milking this situation to the utmost? He evidently wants Claudius to suffer pain—physical, mental, and spiritual. He is not satisfied with only one. All must come into play.

Other questions also arise: What is the distinction between revenge and justice? Which one is Hamlet seeking? Does the Ghost of King Hamlet endanger his son’s immortal soul by ordering this duty? Is Hamlet
selling his own soul to the devil? If Hamlet kills Claudius in the passage quoted above, Claudius will go to heaven and Hamlet will go to hell. That would not fall under the category of justice. However, it must be pointed out that if Hamlet had killed Claudius at this point, many lives would have been saved.

Mere revenge betokens the idea that justice is carried out by an unauthorized individual in an unauthorized manner. Does Hamlet fall under this category? Is the Ghost’s intention justice or revenge? As the son, Hamlet may indeed at that time be seen as authorized to deal out punishment for the murder of his father. There is no indication of a structured legal system in Denmark at the time. Hamlet does not have recourse to the courts for retribution. However, the fact that Hamlet seeks to carry this out in a prolonged torture places him within the realm of mere revenge.

**Character and Theme Quotes: Essential Passage by Theme: Redemption**

**FORTINBRAS:**

For me, with sorrow I embrace my fortune.

I have some rights of memory in this kingdom,

Which now, to claim my vantage doth invite me.

**HORATIO:**

Of that I shall have also cause to speak,

And from his mouth whose voice will draw on more.

But let this same be presently perform'd,

Even while men's minds are wild, lest more mischance

On plots and errors happen.

**FORTINBRAS:**

Let four captains

Bear Hamlet like a soldier to the stage;

For he was likely, had he been put on,

To have proved most royal; and, for his passage,

The soldiers’ music and the rites of war

Speak loudly for him.

Take up the bodies. Such a sight as this
Becomes the field, but here shows much amiss.

Go, bid the soldiers shoot.

*Act 5, Scene 2, Lines 404-420*

**Summary**

In a setup instigated by Claudius and Laertes, Hamlet and Laertes are to fight a duel of honor, to assuage the crime of Hamlet’s murder of Polonius. Laertes, on accepting Hamlet’s apology, states that, while he is satisfied in “nature,” as a son and brother, the duel must still be fought on “terms of honor.” They fight, Laertes with the sword that he has painted with poison. At the first cut, Hamlet’s death is assured, as is Laertes, who is struck by the same sword during an exchange of weapons. Gertrude has died, unknowingly drinking the poison that Claudius had prepared for Hamlet; Claudius dies at the hand of Hamlet.

It is on this scene of death that Fortinbras, the prince of Norway, arrives. He is returning from Poland, where he has been regaining territory that his father lost, an episode in which Hamlet’s father was also involved. With him is the ambassador of England, with the news that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead, though Horatio tells him that this was not Claudius's command.

Horatio, now the spokesman for the house of Denmark, asks that the bodies be removed and placed on the stage (platform) so that he can relate to the people the cause for such a high body count. He tells them that it is a tale of “carnal, bloody, and unnatural acts,” deaths that were intended for others but came back on the heads of those who commanded them.

Fortinbras, shocked by the carnage and confused as to the complete absence of any visible ruler of Denmark, remarks that he has some right to the throne, which he is inclined to claim. Horatio speaks up and tells him Hamlet’s last request was that Fortinbras be given the crown of Denmark. He requests that the coronation take place immediately, lest more conflict arise from outside by those who wish to take advantage of the chaos that Denmark currently finds itself in.

Assuming authority, Fortinbras commands that Hamlet be carried out and placed upon display with all the ceremony of royalty. Fortinbras commends Hamlet as one who, given the chance, would have made an admirable king. It is for this reason that he should now receive the burial ceremonies of a fallen king.

**Analysis**

In this final scene, Fortinbras arrives to assume the throne of Denmark. Fortinbras (a character often left out of film versions) is crucial as a foil to Hamlet. Like Hamlet, Fortinbras is the son of a king who has been killed and whose throne his brother has usurped. Unlike Hamlet, however, Fortinbras takes action and regains the throne and territory lost by his father. Fortinbras is what Hamlet should have been but was not, due to his melancholy and his indecision. It is only through the Ghost of his father that Hamlet takes up his quest to set the kingdom to rights. The Ghost tells Hamlet, “Remember who you are. You are more than what you have become.” Though Hamlet tries valiantly in this task of rediscovery, he is unable to completely do so, leaving the healing of the kingdom to Fortinbras.

Fortinbras symbolizes the redemption of the land in an Arthurian way. In the tale of the Fisher King, the grail king has received the Dolorous Stroke (an unhealable wound) that brings destruction to his kingdom, turning it into a wasteland. It is only through the grail knight Percival that his wound is at last healed, as well as the land. In Hamlet, Fortinbras takes on the role of Percival, the noble knight who heals the kingdom of Denmark. Like the Fisher King’s wound in his thigh or groin, the Dolorous Stroke wounded the legitimate progeny of...
the king. Hamlet, also a grail knight, has tried to redeem the land (finding the grail, or restoring the crown to its rightful owner) but has failed. Fortinbras, on arriving at Elsinore, raises Hamlet posthumously to the rank of king. It is this act that heals the wasteland of Denmark.

Another parallel of Hamlet to the idea of redemption is the story of the Garden of Eden, with King Hamlet as an Adam-figure and his son as a Christ-figure. Like Adam (the father of mankind), King Hamlet was in a garden at the moment death arrived. The Ghost of Hamlet’s father, relating his murder to Hamlet, states in Act 1 that “a serpent stung me.” As the serpent tempted Adam and Eve, bringing Death to mankind, Claudius (in acting as the serpent) brought Death not just to King Hamlet but to the kingdom of Denmark as well. As both Adam and Eve are implicated in the sin of Eden, both Claudius and Gertrude are implicated in the sin of Denmark. As the seed of Adam (Christ) will bring redemption to mankind, so the seed of King Hamlet will bring redemption to Denmark through his death. In fact, it is the same method of death—poison—for both Hamlet and his father, just as sin is the method of death for both Adam and Christ.

Because Hamlet is not divine, his “resurrection” must come about in another way. It is through Fortinbras that Hamlet returns to life, bringing salvation to the kingdom. Fortinbras, as stated previously, is a “glorified” Hamlet, Hamlet as he was meant to be. The intentional parallel between the lives of Fortinbras and Hamlet is meant to portray them as two sides of the same character. They are the dual nature of one person, as Christ has the dual nature of both man and God. This presentation makes Hamlet a Christ-figure, whose death is necessary for redemption. Significantly, Kenneth Branaugh’s 1996 full-text film version portrays Hamlet being carried out by the soldiers, arms spread out in the shape of a cross, intentionally designed to bring to mind the image of Christ taken down from the cross, and thus “flights of angels sing thee to thy rest."
Critical Essays

Critical Commentary: Preface to the Critical Commentary

Preface to the Critical Commentary:

The text of Hamlet exists in three versions: the First Quarto (1603 and hereafter called Q1), the Second Quarto (1604 - Q2), and the text included in the First Folio (1623 - F1). [FN1] To get a 'quarto', the printer took a sheet of paper and folded it in half twice to create four separate sections and then printed the text in these sections. A Folio is printed on a large, complete sheet of paper. Our modern paperbacks and 'coffee table' books are almost equivalent to a quarto and a folio. This means that there are two versions of Hamlet, printed at different times, in the small version, and one large 'official' version printed by Shakespeare's friends. If all these texts had the same words, the same punctuation, the same spelling, the same number of lines, and the same character names, then there would be no problem. However, that is not the case with Hamlet, and editors feel that in order to make a text that everyone can read with ease, adjustments have to be made.

In order to arrive at a 'complete' version of the Hamlet that Shakespeare wrote, editors take all three texts and compare them. According to many editors of Shakespeare texts, the text of Q1 is so different from the other two that it is labelled corrupt or 'bad'. The latest critical thinking, however, is that this text is not 'bad', but simply a different version of the play. The F1 text omits more than 200 lines found in Q2. When F1 and Q2 could be wrong, Q1 might be right. For example, in Act 1, scene 2, Hamlet has a soliloquy that begins, 'Oh that this too, too ----- flesh would melt'. The word that goes in that space is 'sallied' in Q1 and Q2, and 'solid' in F1. 'Sallied' meaning 'gone' does not make sense. 'Sullied' would mean that Hamlet is feeling so down, he feels dirty, which could be a possible meaning. The word 'solid', however, seems to make the most sense when put against the following line which is 'Thaw, and resolve itself into a dew!' One editor may choose 'sullied', another 'solid'. But the confusion does not end there. Because there are a different number of lines in Q1, Q2, and F1, it is difficult to number the lines so that they can be referenced easily. With a long and popular play like Hamlet, therefore, most editors will choose the best meaning of a word from all three versions, insert lines into one that are missing from another, and then number the lines of the copy that they end up with. They will also make the characters' names the same throughout so that a reader or performer knows who is speaking a line. This text is known as a conflated text. Most schools and most people involved with a production of the play use a conflated text because they feel they are getting what Shakespeare originally set down.

A conflated text is 3,760 lines long, and because Hamlet is probably the most complex of all Shakespeare's plays, this analysis will use a conflated text: William Shakespeare. Hamlet. David Bevington, ed. New York: Bantam Books, 1988. All act, scene, and line numbers refer to this edition.

Footnotes
1. Though three additional Folios were printed after the First, these were more or less based on the First and not considered in this discussion.

Critical Commentary: Act I Commentary

Scene i: Hamlet opens with two guards on watch. Strangely, the opening line is 'Who's there?' (1.1.1). Of course this is what we all want to know, and by the end of the play we will have multiple answers. The question receives a curious response: 'Nay, answer me. Stand and unfold yourself.' (1.1.2). The other voice says 'Long live the King!' (1.1.3). Like many other Shakespeare plays, this opening grabs our attention and
pulls us into the world of the play, a world probably very different from the one in which we are a member of an audience. We do not know where we are geographically in the play, or what time it is, or what is going on. To complicate things, the men on the stage do not know all that much either! Shakespeare has very cleverly, although we do not realise it now, put the entire play in these three lines. As we move from this point deeper and deeper into the play, these three statements, 'Who's there?', 'Stay and unfold yourself', and 'Long live the King!' will be asked and answered over and over again, and each time the answers will be different.

Bernardo has come to relieve Francisco from the watch. It is midnight, the beginning of the 'grave-yard shift', and Bernardo waits for Marcellus and Horatio to join him. As their conversation continues, it becomes apparent that Horatio is not a usual member of the watch. Bernardo and Marcellus have seen something as they stood guard for the last two nights, a 'dreaded sight' (1.1.29), an 'apparition' (1.1.32). Horatio thinks the two men are imagining things, but they insist that their vision is real. Bernardo begins to tell Horatio the story of how, over the past two nights, at the stroke of one in the morning — Bernardo is interrupted by the appearance of a Ghost. Bernardo, as if to prove his case, asks Horatio to speak to what seems to be the Ghost of a dead King. Reluctantly, Horatio commands the spirit to speak to him, but the Ghost disappears. Not surprisingly, Horatio believes he has seen the Ghost of the 'dead' (1.1.45), 'buried' (1.1.52), King of Denmark.

Now, the three statements, 'Who's there?', 'stay and unfold yourself', and 'Long live the King' spring up in our minds. Who's there? Bernardo, Marcellus (both sentries); Horatio (whom Marcellus calls a scholar [1.1.46]); and the ghost of a dead King. 'Stay and unfold yourself': The Ghost refuses to speak to Horatio and apparently has not spoken to either of the guards. 'Long live the King!': The Ghost from the afterlife is walking in the middle of the night, but if this King is dead and buried, who is the King now?

Horatio begins to give us much needed answers. This Ghost looks as he did when he fought Norway and Poland 'on the ice' (1.1.67). This Ghost does not appear as we might think a King would, dressed in stately robes and a crown, but in 'armour'. Horatio knows right away that 'This bodes some strange eruption to our state' (1.1.73). Now that Horatio has brought up the subject of the state, Marcellus the soldier who obeys without question, pursues Horatio. He wants to know, as we do, just what is going on. He wants to know why there are twenty-four hour guards, armoury manufacture, and shipbuilding, with not even Sunday as a day of rest.

Horatio goes back to the history of events before the play opened, and brings the guards, and us, up to date. The old King whose Ghost we have just seen, had been drawn into battle with King Fortinbras of Norway. The two men wagered a large amount of land, and when King Hamlet (Horatio names him) killed King Fortinbras, the land went to Denmark. King Fortinbras' son, Fortinbras, to avenge his father's death (even though the wager was drawn up in a legal, binding contract) has raised an illegal army of 'lawless resolutes' (1.1.102) to get the land back. That is why Denmark is preparing for all-out war around the clock. Bernardo agrees with Horatio and the scholar begins a long poem about how natural events often forecast disturbances in politics. Suddenly, the Ghost appears again.

Horatio once again urges the Ghost to speak to him. He offers to help the spirit, asks it to tell him if he has a message about the future, or if it had committed any sins to atone for. Then, a rooster (or 'cock') crows. The Ghost vanishes. The three men decide to break up the watch and relay what they have seen to 'young Hamlet' (1.1.176). Horatio is sure that the Ghost will speak to this young man with the same name. Now we have more answers. Denmark is preparing for a war brought about by the killing of the King of Norway over a wager, and it is being haunted by the King who did the killing. King Fortinbras' son is young as is the young man who is obviously the Ghost's son. Both are named for their fathers, and have, apparently, succeeded their fathers to the throne.

In 181 lines, Shakespeare has constructed one of the most effective of all his opening scenes, probably only comparable to the opening of Macbeth. We may think that we will see a straight-forward story, one with a
beginning, a middle, and an end, but from the play's beginning, we quickly become aware that the narrative line in this play is not direct or straight. Shakespeare opens the play in media res (in the middle of things). He then flashes back to fill in a few details, fast forwards to what may happen, and comes back to the present. In so doing, Shakespeare challenges us to stay focused on events, to put clues together, to try to predict where the story is going, before he shifts things around once again. Nonetheless, we think that this play is going to be about how Hamlet and Fortinbras battle it out for disputed lands, and Hamlet is going to win, just like his father. Can it be that simple?

Scene ii: If we thought 'Who's there?' was a strange opening, this one may seem stranger: 'Though yet of Hamlet our dear brother's death/ The memory be green…' (1.2.1-2). We are shocked — this cannot be right. Because this man says 'our dear brother' using what is called 'the royal we', we know he must be the King, but he said 'brother', not 'son'. Again, 'Who's there?' is answered by this man; 'unfold yourself' means that this man is King Hamlet's brother; 'Long live the King!' means that he is the King. As the King continues his speech, we are told that the entire country has been mourning for the King that has died. This King, debating with himself about a proper mourning period and the proper time to resume social activities, and taking advice from his councillors and courtiers, has apparently married his sister. Is this all possible? We do not have long to think about it because the King moves along his agenda swiftly to the issue of war with Fortinbras.

He informs the court that Fortinbras has been pestering him to surrender the land and may think that Denmark may not be ready for war because they have been in mourning or because they are weak. The King sends Cornelius and Voltemand to carry a message about Fortinbras' actions to Old Norway, Fortinbras' uncle, who is ill and bedridden. The King of Norway is in the same position as this King: they are both brothers to the last Kings and have nephews.

The King of Denmark continues dealing with public business and turns his attention to Laertes (Lay-AIR-tees). This young man is the son of Polonius, one of the King's ministers, and seeks the King's approval to go to France. The King asks Polonius if he agrees and he does. This section of the scene is especially important. Here we have one son with a living father. This third son forms a triangle of sons which is reflected in the triangle of fathers. The difference in this father triangle is that Polonius is alive and the others are dead. Furthermore, the number three becomes a repetitive motif of the play.

With these three matters resolved, the King turns to 'my cousin Hamlet and my son' (1.2.64). This line does little to clarify the 'sister' whom the king married, but for the Jacobians, 'cousin' meant someone who was not immediate family. Shakespeare has chosen this word very carefully. Under canonical law, a brother was precluded from marrying his brother's widow. It was considered incest, the most famous case being Henry VIII's marriage to Catherine of Aragon, his brother Arthur's widow. By calling Hamlet 'cousin', he indicates that he is not a close relative, but calling him 'son' indicates he is close. Such confusion would cover any sin that might be inferred. This pattern is immediately picked up in Hamlet's response, his first line in the play, 'A little more than kin and less than kind' (.65). In addition, Hamlet is more than kin to the King: he is a son, a stepson, a nephew, and a rival for the Crown. The King and Queen beg Hamlet to cease mourning for his father and to stay with them in Denmark (Hamlet has been in school in Wittenberg, Germany). He says he will, and is then left alone.

In Shakespeare's plays, asides and soliloquies to the audience are considered to be the truth told by the character. In this, the first of many soliloquies, Hamlet opens a window on the thoughts running through his mind. He wishes he could just 'melt' (1.2.129) and evaporate away, or even commit 'self-slaughter' (1.2.132). He is very depressed and everything seems 'weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable' (1.2.133). Hamlet's feelings are ones we can all relate to, especially after the death of a loved one, but what has caused him to react so strongly? Hamlet says his father the King has been dead for 'two months' (1.2.138), so his depression could stem from that alone. When he recalls, however, how his parents were together, we know the cause is much deeper. Hamlet remembers that when the King died, his mother was grief-stricken, 'all tears' (1.2.149), but
after a mere month, she married the King, his uncle. This is what has Hamlet so upset — the speed at which, and the person whom, his mother remarried. Hamlet prophesises; 'It is not, nor it cannot come to good' (1.2.158).

Here we have a reason for Hamlet's anger and depression to parallel Fortinbras' anger. We are also told to expect worse, but can we trust what Hamlet is saying? On the one hand, he may just be venting his anger; however, his comments agree with those of Scene One, that all is not well, and he chooses to make his comments directly to us. This direct address not only gives us information on Hamlet's point of view, but it also implicates us in the events of the play since only we strangers hear his private thoughts.

Having left the place where the Ghost appeared, Horatio, Marcellus, and Bernardo come upon Prince Hamlet deep in thought. At first, Hamlet thinks they are just courtiers, but then realises it is Horatio, his best friend. Hamlet greets him warmly and asks him why he has come to Elsinore. Horatio tells him that he came for King Hamlet's funeral and Hamlet suggests it was for the wedding. Surprisingly, as Hamlet continues his sarcastic remarks about the wedding party, he says 'My father! Methinks I see my father' (1.2.184). Horatio, of course, thinks that the Ghost has appeared to Hamlet, but from Hamlet's comments he soon learns this is not the case. He tells Hamlet the details of the Ghost's apparition. Eerily, Hamlet repeats Horatio's conclusion from Scene One [' 'Tis strange' (1.1.68)]; ' 'Tis very strange' (1.2.221). Hamlet pries details from Horatio, and then tells him he will join the Watch. Hamlet is uncertain, however, if the apparition is indeed his father's spirit. The scene ends with the men arranging to meet on the same platform between 11 p.m. and midnight. Hamlet is determined to question the Ghost.

This scene uses our empathy with a young man coping with the grief of losing a close relative to trap us into the world of Elsinore, and it does so rather cunningly. We understand what the young man must be going through. The thought that his uncle is on the throne instead of him does not at first strike us as strange, and because we have no input from Gertrude, we become biased against her for acting so hastily. However, as we will discover, life is not that simple in Elsinore. Hamlet has no friends within the court — Horatio is an outsider. Hamlet has been away at school, so in a sense, he too is an outsider. We are also outsiders and now paradoxically in league with those who will try to sort out the court's problems.

**Scene iii:** We have already seen Laertes ask to leave Denmark and go to France, and this scene reveals the family relationships of the Polonius family which will serve as a contrast to the Royal family. We first meet Laertes' sister, Ophelia. As any big brother would, Laertes gives Ophelia advice. He asks her to write to him, and warns her about her boyfriend — Hamlet. From what Laertes says, we can deduce that Ophelia and Hamlet have been spending a lot of time together, and Hamlet has given the impression to the family that he loves Ophelia. Laertes, however, tells Ophelia that even though Hamlet may love her now, any feelings he may have for her cannot possibly be acted on:

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His greatness weighed, his will is not his own.
For he himself is subject to his birth.
He may not as unvalued persons do,
Carve for himself, for on his choice depends
The safety and health of this whole state,
And therefore must his choice be circumscribed
Unto the voice and yielding of that body
Whereof he is the head (1.3.17-24).
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If we look carefully at Laertes' words, we can see that in addition to advising Ophelia, he is also giving us his perception of Hamlet, a perception that differs significantly from what we have seen of him. Laertes speaks of Hamlet's 'greatness' and the restrictions placed on him as 'head' of Denmark. We have just seen that Hamlet is not King of Denmark, nor does it seem that he will be any time soon. Yet Laertes says that his choice of a
wife affects 'the safety and health of this whole state', implying that not only is Hamlet choosing a wife, but also a Queen for Denmark and mother of kings when Hamlet does take the throne. Denmark, however, did not have a system of primogeniture (the succession of son to father), but rather a semi-democratic process. A Council consisting of members of the all-powerful nobility chose a king. This choice had to be approved by representatives of the common people from the provinces throughout Denmark. The real power was the Council and kings were only entrusted with the management of the State and the Royal Household. In fact, the King was actually crowned by the Councillors who all touched the crown as they said, 'Your Majesty, accept from us the Crown of this State...' [FN2] Laertes' comments not only speak of a new political system, but also indicate that Hamlet's uncle, Claudius, [FN3] must have had the qualifications that the Council wanted in order to win an election. Claudius' first action of sending Cornelius and Voltemand to Norway clearly indicates some proficiency at foreign affairs, while his preparations for war show organisational skills and leadership.

Furthermore, Hamlet was in school in Wittenberg and did not come back to Denmark for the election. It would seem then that Laertes places himself outside the political world of Denmark, and thus, with Hamlet and Fortinbras completes one of the triangles of the play. Laertes further reminds us that Ophelia is also not part of that political world.

Ophelia, after her brother's long speech, simply advises him not to give her any advice that he himself will not follow. In doing so, she presents herself as a bright, intelligent girl fully aware of the court's double standard.

Their father, Polonius, enters and we see yet another triangle — the three families of the play. This one consists of two men and a woman like the Royals, but Gertrude is the only mother and Ophelia the only daughter who appear in the play. The other fathers mentioned, Old Hamlet and Old Fortinbras, are dead. Like the Fortinbras family, the Polonius family has no mother figure. The Royal Family, by contrast, consists of an uncle/stepfather, a mother/aunt, a son/stepson/nephew. In this way, Shakespeare questions just what is meant by the term 'family'. Significantly, by the play's end, all these familial units will be obliterated.

Polonius, like Laertes to Ophelia, offers advice to Laertes in a series of platitudes, and Laertes leaves for France. When he is gone, Polonius asks Ophelia what her brother had said to her. When she says 'something touching on the Lord Hamlet' (1.3.90), Polonius seizes upon her vague statement that Hamlet has 'of late made many tenders of his affection' (1.3.100-101). Using the word 'tender' as a noun and a verb, Polonius reiterates Laertes' warning, telling his daughter she must give up Hamlet and refuse to even talk with him. Dutifully and fatefully, Ophelia agrees.

This exchange reinforces the double standard of the court and establishes Ophelia as a pawn in its politics, reducing her value as a person and minimising her as a female. It also sets into motion one of the subplots that contribute to the end of the play — the destruction of Ophelia.

Scene iv: This scene brings us to Hamlet's confrontation with the Ghost whose information will feed Hamlet's thirst for revenge. But before we see the Ghost, we hear about Claudius' drinking habits. It is apparently the custom in Denmark for drums and trumpets to sound when the King downs a draught of wine (1.4.10-11). Hamlet finds the custom distasteful in that it colours international opinion of the Danes. He philosophises that it is human nature to judge the whole person by 'the stamp of one defect' (1.4.31), even unfairly.

Suddenly, the Ghost appears and Hamlet instantly judges the Ghost to be that of his father from its appearance, an example of what he has just said about appearances. He asks it why it appears 'in complete steel' (1.4.520). The Ghost simply motions Hamlet to follow it. Marcellus and Horatio do not think this is a good idea and try to restrain Hamlet physically. Threatening the two men with death, Hamlet follows the Ghost.
Marcellus and Horatio are unsure of what to do or what the apparition means. Marcellus, the practical soldier, makes his feelings clear in one of the most famous lines of the play: 'Something is rotten in the state of Denmark' (1.4.90). It was believed that spirits walked the earth only when there was upheaval in real life. For Marcellus, the return of the Old King's spirit means that there is a major problem in the Royal House, an opinion that Horatio had voiced in the opening scene (1.1.116-129). In this way, Shakespeare emphasises the effects that personal choices by politicians have on the world at large, an echo of what Laertes had told Ophelia. The playwright continues to give us more details of the history of the play that happened before the play opened.

Scene v: This is the scene we have been waiting for: is it or is it not the Ghost of the Old King? Will it speak at last? What will it say if it does? Initially, like us, Hamlet is unsure of the Ghost, calling it 'poor ghost', not 'father', but the Ghost announces, 'I am thy father's spirit' (1.5.10). He proceeds to tell Hamlet that his afterlife is spent in a purgatory of 'fires' (1.5.12), and reveals why he has appeared:

> If thou didst ever thy dear father love —
> … Revenge his foul and unnatural murder (1.5.24, 26).

Hamlet is very surprised at this accusation, and urges the Ghost to tell him more so that he

> … with wings as swift
> As meditation or the thoughts of love
> May sweep to my revenge (1.5.30-32).

There is no sign here that Hamlet disbelieves the Ghost or that he will delay in exacting revenge. The Ghost relates that the cover story of his death was that he was bitten by a poisonous snake during a nap in the garden. The Ghost adamantly denies this story and says that the 'snake' is now the King. Hamlet voices his suspicion of Claudius, and the Ghost details how Claudius seduced the Queen, waited for his chance, and poured poison into his ear. The Old King died a horrible death, deprived 'of life, of crown, of queen' (1.5.76) and worst of all, deprived of the chance to repent his sins and receive the Last Sacrament. The Ghost pleads with Hamlet to avenge his death, but not to hurt the Queen. Telling Hamlet 'Remember me' (1.5.92), the Ghost disappears.

The Ghost's description of his death serves as a foil to the callousness of Claudius and to his lack of brotherly love. To Shakespeare and his audience, the damnation of a soul would surely be a horrible crime, but especially for a brother to do to a brother. Although the Ghost incriminates the Queen and castigates her as 'my most seeming-virtuous queen' (1.5.47), there is no evidence of her having an affair with Claudius before the Old King was murdered. In fact, Hamlet comments in 1.2 that his mother seemed totally in love with her husband and grief-stricken at his funeral (1.2.143-149). Now all the pieces seem to have fallen into place.

Hamlet's father has been murdered and he, the dutiful son, will revenge his death:

> … thy commandment all alone shall live
> Within the book and volume of my brain,
> Unmixed with baser matter (1.5.103-105).

Curiously, when describing Claudius, Hamlet speaks a line that echoes of one spoken by Richard in the opening sequence of Richard III: ‘… One may smile, and smile, and be a villain’ (1.5.109). Hamlet is determined to act without delay, and swears as much to his father. We know, however, that if this is all there is, this is going to be a very short play. Hamlet may be reacting from emotion or from youthful spirit that may soften in retrospect. With the entrance of Horatio and Marcellus, there is a chance that Hamlet may be having second thoughts already. After all, he can hardly walk up to Claudius and say 'You killed my father and now I kill you'.
Hamlet (and the Ghost) swear the two men to secrecy about what they have seen and heard. Horatio comments again that these events are 'wondrous strange' (1.5.173), and Hamlet tells his friend that he has already formed a plan 'to put an antic disposition on' (1.5.181). The three men leave together.

The situation is far from resolved. We do not know what Hamlet means by 'an antic disposition', nor do we know what form his revenge will take. We do, however, believe that the Ghost is indeed Hamlet's father, even though we know intellectually that such an apparition is an unlikely event. This is how Shakespeare draws us further into the world of Denmark where things are not as they seem and corruption is disguised as virtue.

Footnotes

3. Since the name of the King is never mentioned in the text, the King will be called 'Claudius' as it appears in the List of Characters for the remainder of this analysis.

Critical Commentary: Act II Commentary

Scene i: As Shakespeare ended the last act by challenging what we believe, he begins Act Two by challenging what we have seen. A new character, Reynaldo, is in conversation with Polonius whom we have seen as a careful father. Polonius is sending Reynaldo to spy on Laertes and to intentionally spread lies about him. His reason for this is to find out the truth of Laertes' behaviour. Perhaps we have forgotten that Polonius told Ophelia that her behaviour may 'tender me a fool' (1.3.110). Polonius is thus shown to be a man who worries that the things his children do will reflect on him as a father and as a man, affecting his position at court. This revelation also shows how deep the suspicion in Elsinore goes. No one can be assured of safety, and, by employing Reynaldo, Polonius foreshadows Claudius' using Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to spy on Hamlet.

At this point, Ophelia enters to tell her father that a dishevelled, disturbed Hamlet has just left her, scaring her with his looks and his manner. Is this what he meant by 'antic disposition'? Is this part of his plan for revenge? Polonius decides from her story that Hamlet is suffering from 'the very ecstasy of love' (2.1.104). When Ophelia tells him that instead of encouraging Hamlet she has obeyed her father and 'denied his access' (2.1.111-112), Polonius admits he suspected Hamlet was not serious about her and that he may have acted hastily. He tells her they must go to the King and confess what he has done before Hamlet does something drastic.

From Ophelia's account and Polonius' reaction, we are unsure whether Hamlet is pretending to be mad or is actually mad. The scene also reinforces Ophelia's position as a meaningless object in the politics of the court. We must also question Ophelia's love for Hamlet. She seems to be unwilling to disobey her father, like Juliet in Romeo and Juliet or Celia in As You Like It, but seems to have turned her back on Hamlet rather easily. In addition, Polonius is true to form, worrying about his position, more than the effect his dictates are having on his daughter.

Scene ii: In a 'public' scene (in front of others), Claudius and Gertrude welcome Hamlet's school friends, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to the court. They have been summoned to spend time with Hamlet and try to figure out what his problem is. Gertrude even promises them a royal reward. Instead of declining what amounts to bribery as true friends would, they accept and tell the King and Queen they will do their best. It seems that the King and Queen are genuinely concerned to find out what troubles the young Prince, and, as Rosencrantz and Guildenstern leave, Polonius enters to tell the royal couple that he knows the answer. But first, Claudius must receive the news from Norway from Cornelius and Voltemand.
The two ambassadors inform Claudius that Old Norway thought his nephew, Fortinbras, was raising an army to invade Poland. He investigated further and discovered Fortinbras' plan against Denmark. Found out, the young man apologised and promised 'never more/ To give th'assay of arms' (2.270-71) against the Danes. Old Norway rewarded Fortinbras with 3,000 crowns (money) and permission to raise an army for a Polish campaign. Claudius is pleased with this arrangement, accepting it easily because it relieves some of the pressure on him. Perhaps he accepts it too easily. With Fortinbras now officially funded by his uncle, there is no reason why he should not return to Norway after Poland by way of Denmark. Have the ambassadors, in an effort to please the King, overlooked other possibilities? Claudius says

\[
\text{… at our more considered time we'll read,} \\
\text{Answer, and think upon this business (2.2.81-82)}
\]

but his feasting and drinking may distract him. And there is also Hamlet to worry about. Nowhere in the text is there any indication that Claudius does give the Fortinbras problem any further consideration, and it is this failure that will directly create the end of the play.

After the ambassadors leave, Polonius tries to ease the King and Queen into a frame of mind that will allow him to escape unpunished for his meddling in the Hamlet-Ophelia relationship. When Claudius asks him directly, 'But how hath she received his love?' (2.2.128-129), Polonius answers the question with a question: 'What do you think of me?' (2.2.129). His is a rhetorical strategy still used by politicians today. Instead of coming straight out and saying what happened, he adds a lengthy prologue by asking the King what the King would think, knowing Hamlet's importance to Denmark, if Polonius had stood by and let love develop between the two young people. In carefully phrasing his confession, Polonius reiterates to the King that he has no designs on marrying his daughter to a Prince of Denmark, nor any ambitions to be the father of a queen or grandfather of kings. Assuring Claudius that he does not want his place, he then follows his confession by focusing on Hamlet as the victim, yet author, of his own madness, minimising the role of his own interference.

Claudius agrees with Polonius to hide behind an arras (tapestry; curtain) to observe Hamlet and Ophelia, and as Hamlet approaches reading a book, Polonius tells Claudius and Gertrude that they must leave so that he can speak to him. Polonius must be sure of his conclusion that Hamlet is lovesick before Claudius sees the couple. If Polonius is wrong, it could be more than embarrassing.

When Polonius accosts Hamlet, Hamlet employs an even more sophisticated rhetorical technique than that Polonius had used on Claudius. Knowing that Polonius thinks he is mad, Hamlet tells Polonius the truth in metaphors that serve two purposes: (1) they sound like the non-sensical gibberish of a madman; (2) they lead Polonius to the false conclusion that Hamlet is love-sick. Hamlet calls Polonius 'a fish-monger' (2.2.174), implying that the old man is common and offends the senses. When Polonius denies he is a fishmonger, Hamlet wishes he 'were so honest a man' (2.2.176), demonstrating that Hamlet is well aware of Polonius' double-dealing politics. Hamlet's statement about the sun, maggots, and rotting flesh describes the splendour of the court that breeds evil and hides corruption. He warns that Ophelia 'may conceive', or understand, this wicked world, and, if Polonius would be a good father, he should 'look to't' (2.2.186), and protect her. Polonius compares what he thinks is Hamlet's state of mind to his own when he was young, and decides to continue to question the Prince. Hamlet tells Polonius that the book he is reading says that old men have gray beards, that their faces are wrinkled, heir eyes purging thick amber and plum-tree gum, and that they have a plentiful lack of fruit, together with most weak hams. (2.2.198-201)

Hamlet says he believes this is true and we know he is talking about Polonius and Claudius, old gray, bearded, wrinkled men that are probably impotent and may have legs too weak to make love. However, he tells Polonius that it is rude to say these things in print. Polonius has an inkling that Hamlet is too quick-witted to be insane, but cannot let go of his conviction that he is mad. He takes his leave of Hamlet to arrange the meeting with Ophelia, and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern enter. We have seen the scheming and plotting of
the old order, and now we are about to witness the deception by the new.

The three young men engage in a pseudo-intellectual conversation about Fortune, Denmark, and why the two friends are at Elsinore. It is vital that Hamlet ascertains whether he can trust them. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern evade Hamlet's question by lying, not once, but three times. When Guildenstern confesses finally that they were sent for, Hamlet knows where he stands. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, however, are unaware they have given away their mission. Hamlet tells the two men that man is the noblest of creatures, but not in Elsinore. Trying to do as the King and Queen have asked, 'to draw him on to pleasures' (2.2.15), they announce that a troupe of players have arrived, an event that excites Hamlet. He asks the first Player to recite a speech about Priam and Hecuba, a story from the ancients. Polonius is less than happy with the impromptu performance, but the Player has been moved to tears. Hamlet asks the Player if the company can do a play called The Murder of Gonzago, and if he can give them a speech of 12-16 lines to insert into the play. The First Player agrees, and everyone exits, except Hamlet.

He begins another soliloquy by cursing himself that he has more motivation for tears than the Player:

    What's Hecuba to him, or he to Hecuba
    That he should weep for her? (2.2.559-560)

Hamlet addresses the question that we may have been asking ourselves. What is he waiting for? He seemed on fire to revenge his father's death when he met the Ghost, but now enough time has passed for Cornelius and Voltemand to go to Norway and back, and for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to travel to the court. He has put the 'antic disposition' on long enough for the court to think he is mad indeed. Hamlet lets us know why he has delayed in this speech. He does not trust his senses. He is self-aware enough to know that the Ghost may have been a projection of his own 'weakness' and 'melancholy' (2.2.602), quite an understanding hundreds of years before Freud and psychoanalysis. Hamlet wants to be certain beyond any doubt that Claudius is guilty and that the Ghost was more than a figment of his imagination. To do this he will observe the King's reaction to the lines he will have inserted into the play since 'the play's the thing/ Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the King' (2.2.605-606). There is also the implication that Hamlet is not careless, that he has considered his options carefully, that he knows he is outnumbered at court by those who support Claudius. Perhaps too, Hamlet knows that the assassination of a duly elected, anointed king, while it may satisfy his need for revenge and the Ghost's mandate, may have devastating effect on Denmark, his home country which he has been raised to lead one day. This very long scene which began with the King and Queen bribing Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to spy on Hamlet ends with Hamlet's plan to flush out the King. Is there more political intrigue to come?

Footnotes:

4. For as entertaining perspective on these two characters, see Tom Stoppard. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead.

Critical Commentary: Act III Commentary

Scene i: As with almost all of Shakespeare's plays, Act Three presents us with the turning point where all the information we have been given in the first two acts leads us to the climax and resolution of the last two acts. We know that Polonius intends that he and Claudius will observe a meeting between Hamlet and Ophelia which Polonius has arranged. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern report to Claudius and Gertrude that they have been unsuccessful in getting 'some confession/ Of his true state' (3.1.9-10). They relay Hamlet's invitation to the play and Claudius turns his attention to the Hamlet-Ophelia encounter.
Claudius and Polonius hide, and Hamlet begins the most famous soliloquy in Shakespeare, 'To be or not to be'. Hamlet debates with himself the value of continuing to live when there are such comforts in being dead. But we must all be aware that no one has come back from 'the undiscovered country' (3.1.80) to tell us there are indeed comforts in the next life. It is this uncertainty about the next life, the not knowing, and guilt about our present life that make us 'lose the name of action' (3.1.89). Hamlet knows that what he has planned could result in eternal damnation. It is this fear which compounds all his other fears about killing Claudius which makes him delay.

As planned, Hamlet meets Ophelia. He greets her coolly. When she says she has 'remembrances' (3.1.94) of his that she wants to give back to him, he denies they are his. Curiously, Shakespeare does not tell us what these remembrances are. They could be love letters, trinkets, dried flowers — anything one lover gives another. The point is that it does not matter what they are. Because Ophelia has decided to obey her father rather than be supportive and faithful to Hamlet, they have lost their meaning, and she tells him so. For Ophelia, however, their meaning has been lost because Hamlet has been 'unkind' (3.1.102).

Hamlet turns on her, realising what is really going on. He asks her if she is 'honest' and 'fair' (3.1.104, 106). Like her father, Ophelia fails to grasp his meaning. Hamlet tells her he loved her once, and she replies 'Indeed, my lord, you made me believe so' (3.1.117). Obviously there is a vast distance between them now that cannot be breached. Rather than 'I loved you too', Ophelia says that Hamlet made her believe he loved her which implies two things: (1) she may think he was only using her; (2) she is uncomfortable revealing her true feelings in front of the King and her father. Hamlet tells Ophelia that she should not have believed him because he was just trifling with her and that she should go to a convent and shut herself away from the world. He then asks abruptly, 'Where's your father?' (3.1.131. Ophelia lies, 'At home, my lord' (3.1.132).

Hamlet now knows what he has been dreading is true: the woman he loves is being manipulated by her father and by extension, the King. He also knows that they are being watched as they speak. He tells the watchers that women are two-faced, evil creatures and that all the lies have 'made me mad' (3.1.149). He leaves Ophelia, telling her to get out of Elsinore, to go to 'a nunnery' (3.1.152).

Ophelia is devastated. She lists all of Hamlet's qualities, but they are not those of a man with whom one is in love. They are a list of his qualifications for a future King. There is no mention of his tenderness or care as a lover, simply his princely accomplishments. Just as she cannot see Hamlet in terms of the man not the Prince, she cannot see beyond the façade of madness.

However, Claudius does see, and does not like what he sees. He has heard Hamlet's rage against marriage and senses 'some danger' (3.1.170). He resolves to send Hamlet to England and Polonius agrees with the decision. Polonius, however, subtly reminds the King about Gertrude, suggesting that after the play, she talk to her son while Polonius, once again hidden, eavesdrops.

Almost as an after-thought, Polonius asks Ophelia how she is, and turns back quickly to the King. Unfortunately, in addition to the trauma of being rejected and seeing 'madness' first hand, she has outlived her usefulness to her father. Perhaps most importantly, Claudius has become acutely aware that whether it is real or feigned, Hamlet's madness is a very real threat that must be dealt with.

**Scene ii**: In this scene, Shakespeare seems to take over Hamlet the character to offer us what may be his philosophy on directing a play, a device he had used earlier in his career in A Midsummer Night's Dream. Hamlet carefully instructs the Players in their art, and if we did not realise it before, we know now that Hamlet is well-versed in theatre and theatre craft. This skill has obviously been of benefit to him during his difficult stay at Elsinore, where almost all the members of the court are involved in play-acting in the political arena. Horatio, who has been missing from the play, is recruited by Hamlet to observe the King during the performance of the piece written by Hamlet. If Claudius shows no sign of guilt, then Hamlet will know that 'it
is a damnèd ghost' (3.2.81), and that it was an illusion produced by his mind. After plying Ophelia with bawdy insults, The Murder of Gonzago begins.

First to be seen is a silent prologue (the 'dumb show') in which the Ghost's story is enacted, followed by two Players as a King and Queen who have been married for thirty years. The Player Queen remarks that her husband is 'sick of late' (3.2.161), and how very much she loves him. The Player King tells her that he will die soon, and, when he does, she will remarry. She swears she will not, that a second marriage is not for love, but for material gain. In addition, a second marriage would be tantamount to killing her first husband a second time. The Player King responds that once he is dead, she will feel differently. The Player Queen once again swears that she will be as good as dead when he is gone, and will never remarry. When Hamlet asks his mother how she likes the play, her reply is very ironic: 'The lady doth protest too much, methinks' (3.2.225). Hamlet assures Claudius that the play is called The Mousetrap, and is pure fiction. As the play proceeds, Claudius suddenly rises when the murderer pours the poison into the Player King's ear. Claudius bolts away. Hamlet's observation of guilt, confirmed by Horatio, is what he needed to believe what the Ghost said was true. In his excitement, he turns on Rosencrantz and Guildenstern who have been sent to bring him to Gertrude. They try once more to get Hamlet to confide in them, but he rejects their efforts and them. Polonius urges Hamlet to go to his mother, and Hamlet tells us once again that he is resolved to act. He must, however, take care not to vent his anger on his mother in accordance with the Ghost's directions.

Notably, Hamlet's 12-16 lines to be inserted are really 74 lines, thirty-seven rhyming couplets. They have not only served their purpose for Hamlet, but also have a rippling effect. Gertrude, Polonius, and Ophelia, as well as Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, are now convinced of his insanity and engaged with it on a fatal course. Claudius, on the other hand, has had his fears confirmed. Not only does Hamlet know Claudius killed Old King Hamlet, he knows how and why. Hamlet is now a dangerous enemy of the State and cannot be allowed to live if Claudius is to retain his crown. But Claudius cannot kill him outright because of his mother, and because he is a royal prince. Claudius must therefore resort to subterfuge and hope that his international political prowess will again be successful.

**Scene iii:** Claudius opens the scene with perhaps his only true statement about Hamlet 'I like him not' (3.3.1). He charges Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to take Hamlet to England and gives them a 'commission' to take with them. While Guildenstern comments how difficult it is to live safely as the King, Rosencrantz goes further by saying that when a King dies, the death brings the fall of those lives close to the King. That Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are worried about their reward is clearly implied by Rosencrantz's phrase, 'Each small annexment, petty consequence/ Attends the boisterous ruin' (3.3.21-22). It is important to note that at this point in the play, Hamlet has committed no act that would necessitate his being sent from court to another country.

As Polonius goes off to spy on Gertrude and Hamlet, Claudius has a moment of reflection. In Shakespeare, a soliloquy is used to give an audience the character's innermost thoughts and their true feelings. This soliloquy reveals Claudius to be indeed his brother's murderer, and looking to gain heavenly forgiveness without losing 'those effects for which I did the murder:/ My crown, my own ambition, and my queen' (3.3.54-55).

Interestingly Claudius aligns his priorities in their order of importance to him, and we notice that Gertrude comes last, not as a woman (wife), but as Queen. Claudius also uses the personal possessive pronoun 'my' instead of 'the', indicating his supreme ego-centricity. This is not a King of the people, but a king of his own wants and needs. Nevertheless, he makes a sincere attempt to assume the posture of a true penitent.

While he is praying, Hamlet comes in and sees the King in prayer. He begins to raise his sword to kill the King, but suddenly stops. Why does Hamlet not just do it and be done with it? Hamlet reasons that if he kills Claudius while he praying, Claudius' soul will go to heaven, remembering that one of the Ghost's chief complaints was that he was
Cut off even in the blossoms of my sin,
Unhouseled, disappointed, unaeled,
No reckoning made, but sent to my account
With all my imperfections on my head (1.5.77-80).

It is here that we can see clearly that one of things that prevents Hamlet from acting is his sharp mind. A product of a royal, university education, he needs to reason out and think about his actions before he does anything. This thinking so carefully is incompatible with his desire for revenge, a desire that he also rationalises.

This is the only instance in Shakespeare where a soliloquy is imbedded in another soliloquy. Structurally, the positioning of Hamlet's speech places him alongside Claudius who is unable to repent his past actions as Hamlet is unable to act on past actions. We know, as Hamlet does not, that Claudius is trying to wheedle his way out of paying for his crimes. In this instance, Hamlet has lost a golden opportunity for revenge. In the next scene, however, Hamlet will act without thinking and the result will be tragic.

**Scene iv:** Polonius advise Gertrude to use 'tough love' on Hamlet and tell him she has protected him from 'much heat', presumably a reference to Claudius. Polonius then hides behind a tapestry hanging in the room known as an arras in order to hear their conversation.

The exchange between mother and son begins with a caustic tennis match of words. When Gertrude calls for help and Polonius echoes her cries, Hamlet blindly runs his sword through the arras, killing Polonius. Now he thinks that he has done it, but his rash behaviour results in the death of Claudius' Prime Minister not Claudius. What follows is most curious.

For the next 200 lines, Gertrude and Hamlet carry on a conversation they should have had in Act One while Polonius lies dead and bleeding on the floor. Hamlet confronts the Queen with two 'likenesses' of the brother Kings and accuses her openely of incest. She responds that Hamlet is not telling her anything that she does not already know. When Hamlet persists in his verbal attack, she thinks he has really gone mad. At this point, the Ghost appears and intercedes for his widow, telling Hamlet that the Ghost is only there 'to whet thy almost blunted purpose' (3.4.115).

Hamlet then assures his mother that he is not mad, but that the important issue is her sleeping with the King. Gertrude realises that her son is right. Hamlet suggest that practising abstinence one night at a time will eventually make it habit. He tells her that he repents murdering Polonius and warns her not to reveal to Claudius what has just passed between them. He also reminds her that he must go to England and he knows Rosencrantz and Guildenstern have orders for him to be killed once they arrive. He assures her that he has the situation in hand and leaves, taking Polonius' body with him.

Unlike the previous scene in which Hamlet had been so carefully rational, in this scene Hamlet is rash and emotional, probably because the one person he trusts, his mother, seems to have become one of the enemy. Gertrude is Hamlet's link to his happy life before his father's murder, the keeper of their shared history and memories. All this came to an abrupt stop when Gertrude married Claudius. Hamlet must get his mother back on his side, since (1) she was a concern of the Ghost, and (2) because Claudius' reaction to the play has confirmed to Hamlet that Gertrude had no part in King Hamlet's death.

The fact that they choose to ignore the dead, bleeding minister for most of the scene reiterates that incest is a worse sin than murder. Furthermore, the murdered King’s apparition at the same site as the murdered minister indicates that not only are they both dead, but that there is also a difference in their deaths. As Hamlet was not politically motivated, any alienation or antipathy that the audience would normally feel toward such an act is mitigated because Hamlet gains nothing. The off-handed, almost comical way the murder is handled is not meant to absolve Hamlet or minimise the death. Hamlet realises the impact this act will have: 'This man shall
Critical Commentary: Act IV Commentary

Scene i: This scene shows us how devious both Claudius and Gertrude can be at playing the political game. While feigning concern for both his wife and her wayward son, we can see that Claudius is really concerned about the 'whisper o'er the world's diameter' (4.1.41). Gertrude, on the other hand, assures the King that Hamlet killed Polonius in pure madness, bending the truth more than a little. Clearly this marriage is now beyond repair. And it may be that Claudius and Gertrude realise this. Claudius must now get his plan for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to get Hamlet to England going as quickly as possible. One of the keys to this small scene is in the language. Claudius begins and ends by addressing the Queen and referring to himself in the 'royal we'. Such language would normally be reserved for a public meeting, such as that in Act One, scene 2. However, there are only four people in this scene, Claudius, Gertrude, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. And it is the presence of these two outsiders that keeps Claudius aware of public opinion on a royal crisis. Although Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Hamlet's schoolmates, they are also common people who cannot be trusted not to preserve any code of silence regarding what they have witnessed in the private corridors of power. Tom Stoppard's play, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead, demonstrates that they are little men swept up in great affairs. Claudius is behaving here as the consummate politician who knows it is the little things that topple whole governments.

While Gertrude effects Hamlet's suggestions to her, Claudius falls back on the preservation of the monarchy at any and all costs. He is determined that Hamlet's supposed lack of control is not reflected on him.

Scene ii: In this scene, Hamlet confronts Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, who are simply acting on their employment by the King. Of course they do not understand the Prince and Hamlet leads them on a game of hide-and-seek. Only 32 lines, this scene is like a snapshot of the court: no one understanding actions taken, people hiding, bodies in closets (literally and figuratively), and a government trying to maintain control of public opinion. It is from such a world that Hamlet will escape. It is to such a world that he must return.

Scene iii: Claudius opens the scene by uncharacteristically admitting Hamlet's value, even to him: He's loved of the distracted multitude Who like not in their judgement, but their eyes, And where 'tis so, th'offenders scourge is weighed But never the offence (4.3.4-7). Claudius knows that if he is going to ride of Hamlet, then he is going to have to do it through carefully considered means, since Hamlet is the fair-haired darling of the masses, or a 'PR-star'. In their confrontation, Claudius and Hamlet face off as equals, each knowing what the other knows and thinks. Like Macbeth, Claudius is aware that he can only safely be king when Hamlet is out of the way. But he is reluctant to do the deed himself. By drawing on his alliance with England, he reminds us of his skills as an international politician seen in the settlement with Norway. He should be asking himself here if that situation was truly settled. The contrast of this area of power with the domestic crisis of which he has obviously lost control underlines Claudius' capacity for causing more mayhem both internally and externally to Denmark.

Scene iv: Having brought England to our attention, Shakespeare also reminds us that the original threat to Denmark was from Fortinbras of Norway. As Fortinbras asks for permission to pass through Denmark on his way to Poland, an action that should be questioned and could not come at a worse time, Hamlet and his escorts meet Fortinbras' Captain. The Captain explains that the Norwegian army is on its way to Poland 'to gain a little patch of ground/ That hath in it no profit but the name' (4.4.19-20). This leaves Hamlet in a state of amazement. He wonders how men could be so motivated to fight for a cause with so little gain or value when he has 'a father killed, a mother stained/ Excitements of my reason and my blood' (4.4.58-59). He notes
that when he looks around him, everything that he sees seems to make a mockery of his vow of revenge.

Once again, the Prince resolves to follow through on that vow. How he plans to do this is not very clear since he is leaving Denmark. Is he deceiving himself again or does he really mean it this time?(Jump to the text of Act IV, Scene iv)

**Scene v**: This scene is perhaps only comparable to Lady Macbeth's sleepwalking scene in its challenges to an actress. The long absent Ophelia has gone truly mad, in comparison to Hamlet's 'antic disposition'. Initially, Gertrude tells Horatio that she will not see the poor girl, perhaps because she realises that bending the truth to Claudius is one thing; Offering an excuse for her son to his grief stricken girlfriend is quite another matter. When Gertrude finally does see Ophelia, it is a heart-breaking sight. The girl is singing obscene songs, laced with what appear to be lucid observations on her murdered father, Hamlet, and the court. Her father's comment on the method to Hamlet's madness echoes throughout her ravings, but clearly an rational thought is purely accidental.

Once again, Claudius manipulates the event for his own purposes, deferring any wrong-doing from himself. He tells Gertrude that Polonius is 'her father' and Hamlet 'your son', 'he most violent author/ Of his own just remove' (4.5.'81-82). But we know why Ophelia was forced to end her relationship with Hamlet, and how devious Polonius almost caused his own death. Yet from Ophelia's point of view, she has lost the two male influences she had on her life, one who raised her and the other who would be her companion to old age. She is no longer a daughter or a candidate for the position of Queen of Denmark. She is unaware that her brother, Laertes, is heading home from France. Claudius, however, is aware, and we have learned from our previous dealings with the King that he has something up his sleeve.

Laertes crashes into Elsinore 'in a riotous head' (4.5.104) and with a mob that wants Laertes to 'be king' (4.5.111). Claudius rises to the threat. When Laertes demands Claudius to give him his father, Claudius asks why the young man brings rebellion into the palace. He also asks 'Tel me, Laertes/ Why thou art thus incensed' (4.5.129-130), stating the obvious and trying to bring Laertes to a better state of mind for talking. Claudius' first and foremost objective is to let Laertes vent some of his rage and then he can approach him.

In this scene, we see Claudius the politician in action. Once Laertes is calmer, Claudius can compliment him as 'a good child and a true gentleman' (4.5.153), for he knows he needs Laertes' co-operation and loyalty if he is to quash a rebellion and defeat Hamlet at the same time. Having admitted that Polonius is dead (another statement of the obvious) and that he was not responsible, Claudius can then ease the young man into the news about his sister.

Ophelia, suppliant as she has been from the beginning, enters and is in a fit of incoherence. Claudius seizes upon the opportunity. He offers Laertes the kingdom, the crown, his life, and all his possessions if Laertes is not satisfied with Claudius' explanation of why Polonius was killed and then not buried with the rituals due a man in his position.

We all know why and if we had not noticed it before, we now see how very careful Hamlet had to be against so adroit and dangerous a man.

**Scene vi**: With all the action at Elsinore, we would be justified in thinking, 'What's next?' Enter the messengers with letters. Horatio knows they are from Hamlet, but surprisingly, there are also letters from Hamlet to the King.

These letters serve several purposes. They notify Horatio (and us) that Hamlet is back in Denmark. We also learn that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are going on to England, but we have to wait to discover their fate. Hamlet has apparently thought things through (again). More to the point, the letters let Claudius' know that
Hamlet is alive, and that the Hamlet problem remains unsolved. This will not be happy news to Claudius on top of Laertes' arrival and Ophelia's madness, not to mention his wife's not sleeping with him.

**Scene vii:** This scene continues on from 4.5 in which Claudius began his tour-de-force manipulation of Laertes. The King tells Laertes that Hamlet had sought to murder him as well as Polonius, but he took no action because of Gertrude and public opinion. A messenger interrupts to deliver the cryptic letter from Hamlet. As if to seal their new alliance, Claudius asks Laertes' advice (as if he really needs it!), and it is then that Claudius makes his move. He tells Laertes that news of his ability in fencing and arms has reached him, and flattered, Laertes accepts Claudius' suggestion that he duel Hamlet and kill him. A second interruption gives Claudius the final piece to his plan. Gertrude reports Ophelia's death by drowning. Laertes is now steeled in his resolve against Hamlet. Claudius patronisingly tells Gertrude how hard he had worked to calm Laertes down and that this latest blow will probably fire him up again. We almost want to kill Claudius ourselves.

**Critical Commentary: Act V Commentary**

**Scene i:** To give us a brief respite from a landslide of horrible events, Shakespeare now presents two gravediggers who debate whether or not Ophelia committed suicide. Treating a very serious point in this way allows us to digest the far-reaching effects that the events of all the previous acts of the play have shown us. In all, the scene gives us a summary of events through the eyes of the common person in Denmark, while bringing us up-to-date on Hamlet and Horatio. We are also given a brief window into Hamlet's childhood when the gravedigger shows him the skull of Yorick, the court jester. Through his thoughts, we now see a resolved Hamlet, one who has obviously had time to come to some conclusions about mortality and come to terms with his vow of revenge. However, the present arrives in the form of Ophelia's funeral cortège.

Gertrude has obviously thought better of the poor young woman: 'I hoped thou shouldst have been my Hamlet's wife' (5.1.244). After a fit of emotion which his mother explains as 'mere madness', Hamlet knows he is back in the corrupt world of the court. He asks the mourning Laertes, 'What is the reason you use me thus?' (5.1.292). Hamlet will continue the pretence of madness if he means he can get at Claudius. Claudius, aware he is the company of those outside the court, tells Horatio to wait on Hamlet. After Horatio and Hamlet leave, Claudius boldly tells Laertes that they must push their plan and that he must maintain his strength in purpose against Hamlet. Although we know that the graveside of his just buried sister is not an appropriate place for these words, we also know that Claudius is not one to let an opportunity pass him by. But we must wait to see what will happen next.

**Scene ii:** Hamlet and Horatio are deep in conversation as Hamlet reveals what transpired on the voyage to England. He was very restless and distressed by all the villainy that surrounded him and was unsure how he would proceed. He went into Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's cabin, retrieved their commission from the King, and brought it back to his cabin to read. Although he had suspected foul play, he was shocked to learn that when they arrived in England, Claudius intended the English to chop off his head. He felt that since 'they had begun the play', he would finish it. He rewrote the commission so that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern would be executed immediately on their arrival without time to even receive the last rites. Hamlet tells Horatio 'they are not near my conscience' (5.2.58). Calling Claudius 'this canker of our nature', Hamlet informs Horatio that although the English may arrive and inform Claudius of the deception, he still has time to get Claudius. He apologises for the grief he has caused Laertes since he sees that Laertes is trapped the same way he was by the King. The opportunity comes quickly.

A sycophant courtier named Osric delivers a message about the planned duel which Hamlet accepts. Before the duel begins, Hamlet publicly apologises to Laertes, who tells Hamlet that his nature accepts his apology but his honour must be satisfied. The duel begins.
Not only is the tip of Laertes' sword poisoned, but Claudius drops a poisoned pearl into a chalice of wine. Hamlet is the first to score a hit. When Gertrude takes the wine to toast Hamlet, Claudius says only 'Gertrude, do not drink' (5.2.293). He does nothing else to prevent her from drinking her death. As they square off again, Laertes wounds Hamlet, and Hamlet stabs him fatally. The Queen falls, crying 'The drink, the drink! I am poisoned' (5.2.313). Hamlet, not realising what Claudius has done, demands the doors be locked, only to have the dying Laertes confess the whole plan: 'The King, the King's to blame' (5.2.324). Hamlet seizes the poisoned sword and stabs Claudius. When he says he is only hurt, Hamlet pours the poisoned wine down his throat, cursing him: Here, thou incestuous, murderous, damned Dane' (5.2.327). As Hamlet is dying, Horatio wants to die with him, but Hamlet tells him that Horatio must tell his story.

At this point, Fortinbras attacks Elsinore and takes control and the ambassadors arrive from England. Fortinbras accords Hamlet a princely burial and tells Horatio that he will depend on him to tell him what had happened that so many royals are dead at once.

It is a long journey from the royal convocation at the beginning of the play and the death scene at the end of the play. During that time, we have witnessed the growth of a man from an ineffectual royal prince to a dutiful son, loyal to his parents and the royal line. The people of Denmark must deal with a foreign invader on the throne, but this man must surely be better than the King who has just died. Hopefully, the days of the corrupt court are now over. But does history repeat itself? Or is it true as Hamlet says 'Since no man of aught he leaves knows, what is't to leave betimes?'

**Critical Essays: Sample Essay Outlines**

The following paper topics are based on the entire play. Following each topic is a thesis and sample outline. Use these as a starting point for your paper.

- **Topic #1**
  A pivotal scene in Hamlet is the “play within a play,” designed to entrap Claudius. But many of the characters are “play-acting,” and many other scenes echo the dominant theme of illusion and deceit. Trace the motif of acting, seeming, illusion, and deceit as opposed to sincerity, being, reality, and honesty, as these qualities are evidenced throughout the play.

  **Outline**
  I. Thesis Statement: Many of the characters in Hamlet are involved in duplicity designed to deceive, betray, or destroy others. The recurring motif of acting, seeming, illusion, and deceit as opposed to sincerity, being, reality, and honesty illustrates this underlying duplicity throughout the play.

  II. Act I
  A. The sentinels debate whether the Ghost is real or “but our fantasy.”
  B. Hamlet tells Gertrude his grief is genuine: “I know not ‘seems.’”
  C. Laertes and Polonius both warn Ophelia that Hamlet’s words and “tenders of love” toward her may be false.
  D. The Ghost refers to Gertrude as “my most seeming-virtuous queen.”

  III. Act II
  A. Polonius instructs Reynaldo to use indirectness to learn how Laertes is comporting himself in Paris.
  B. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and Polonius and Claudius are all trying to find out through devious means what is bothering Hamlet.
  C. Hamlet notes the fickle nature of the populace, who once ridiculed Claudius, but who now pay dearly for his “picture in little.”
D. Hamlet laments that he, who has cause, cannot avenge his father, while the actor is able to convincingly portray the emotions over imaginary characters and actions.

IV. Act III
A. Claudius and Polonius set Ophelia as bait to Hamlet, to try to learn the cause of his madness.
B. Claudius refers to the discrepancy between his deed and “[his] most painted word.”
C. Hamlet instructs the Players to “hold, as ‘twere, the mirror up to nature.”
D. Hamlet is totally honest with Horatio about the Mousetrap plot because Horatio is beyond flattering, or being beguiled by falseness.
E. “The Mousetrap” and dumb show are “acting” or “seeming,” and Hamlet’s motive in having it performed is ulterior.
F. Hamlet tells Rosencrantz and Guildenstern that they are “playing” him like a flute, and are not being honest with him.
G. Hamlet says his “tongue and soul in this be hypocrites” as he goes to speak with Gertrude, with whom he is very distraught.
H. Claudius discovers that his true thoughts cannot give way to his desired action of praying; yet Hamlet is fooled by the appearance of Claudius at prayer and does not murder him.
I. Hamlet tells Gertrude that her deeds have belied her vows; he urges her to “assume a virtue” if she does not actually have it.

V. Act IV
A. Claudius tells Gertrude of the necessity of making themselves appear blameless in Polonius’ death.
B. Hamlet continues the pretense of madness as he teases Claudius about Polonius’ corpse and his own departure for England.
C. Claudius reveals the fencing plot to Laertes, and says even Hamlet’s mother will be convinced his death is an accident.
D. Claudius asks Laertes if he loved Polonius, “Or are you like the painting of a sorrow, / A face without a heart what would you undertake / To show yourself in deed your father’s son More than in words?”
E. Claudius says they would be better off not to attempt the plot against Hamlet, since if it fails “And . . . our drift look through our bad performance.”

VI. Act V
A. Hamlet and Horatio, discussing the similarity of all skulls despite the owner’s station in life, says not even makeup can keep a lady from looking just like Yorick’s skull.
B. Hamlet criticizes Laertes’ show of grief as inferior to his own grief and love for Ophelia, and leaps into the grave also, so that his actions match his feelings.
C. Hamlet’s use of his father’s signet made the letters appear to be legitimate.
D. The sword fight appears to be legitimate, but is rigged against Hamlet’s success.

• Topic #2
Characters who parallel yet contrast one another are said to be foils. Authors often use foils to clarify character traits as well as issues in stories and plays. Discuss Shakespeare’s use of foils, focusing on the parallels and contrasts of any one of these pairs of characters: Hamlet and Laertes; Hamlet and Horatio; Hamlet and Fortinbras; Laertes and Horatio; Claudius and Hamlet’s father; Gertrude and Ophelia; Polonius and Claudius; Polonius and Hamlet.

Outline
I. Thesis Statement: Shakespeare clarifies character traits as well as central issues in Hamlet by the use of foils, characters who parallel yet contrast one another. One such pair is ________.
II. Hamlet and Laertes
A. Both men seek to avenge a father’s death.
B. Both love Ophelia and mourn her death.
C. Laertes moves to seek immediate redress, while Hamlet hesitates.
D. Laertes is fooled by Claudius’ duplicity, and endures Polonius’ pomposity; Hamlet sees Claudius’ treachery, and mocks Polonius.

III. Hamlet and Horatio
A. Hamlet praises Horatio as a just and temperate man, who “is not passion’s slave,” who suffers life’s ups and downs with equanimity.
B. Hamlet is tormented, confused, and appears insane to nearly everyone who witnesses his behavior or hears him speak.
C. Although Horatio does not have the elements to contend with that Hamlet does, the suggestion is that Horatio would have responded very differently and more effectively, had he faced them.

IV. Hamlet and Fortinbras
A. Like Laertes, Fortinbras seeks immediate redress for his father’s death, and is curbed only by the intervention of his uncle, King of Norway.
B. Hamlet must be prompted and later reminded by his father’s Ghost to get on with the task of avenging the murder.
C. Hamlet’s endorsement of Fortinbras as the new king of Denmark indicates Hamlet’s approval of Fortinbras’ character and demeanor.

V. Laertes and Horatio
A. Laertes is a lesser version of Horatio, made so because of Laertes’ gullibility in the face of Claudius’ manipulative flattery.
B. Hamlet notes that Horatio is above flattery, and thus unable to be manipulated.
C. Both young men are basically good and decent, and genuinely care for Hamlet and for the kingdom.

VI. Claudius and King Hamlet
A. Hamlet draws many invidious comparisons between these brothers, noting that Claudius is not one fraction the man he murdered.
B. Claudius attempts to manipulate everyone through deceit, which is apparently how he wooed Gertrude, who seems unaware of the fratricide until Hamlet reveals it to her.
C. Claudius enlists the help of the British, under threat of retaliation if they do not kill Hamlet upon his arrival in England.
D. Claudius ends up being directly or indirectly responsible for all of the deaths in the play: the King, Ophelia, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, Gertrude, Laertes, Hamlet—and his own.

VII. Gertrude and Ophelia
A. Both women are obedient to their men, Ophelia naively so.
B. Both are knowing participants in plots to deceive Hamlet and learn the cause of his “transformation.”
C. Neither is fully aware of the evil directing her actions.
D. Both try to humor Hamlet in his madness, seeking to gentle him out of his torment.
E. Hamlet’s rough treatment of them both results in Ophelia’s eventual madness and Gertrude’s repentance.
F. Gertrude’s characterization revolves around her sexuality; Ophelia’s revolves around her chastity.
VIII. Polonius and Claudius
A. Both men are arrogant and manipulative.
B. Polonius is consistently shown to be a foolish old man who misjudges his abilities and popularity.
C. Claudius is keenly aware of how he appears to others, and is at great pains to shore up public opinion to protect his regency.
D. Hamlet says, when he mistakenly stabs Polonius, “I took thee for thy better” [Claudius].

IX. Polonius and Hamlet
A. Polonius errs by acting too soon and too frequently in matters which are really not his concern.
B. Hamlet errs by delaying action in matters which are of central importance in his life and well-being.
C. Whereas Hamlet is perceived by nearly everyone as being insane, Polonius is widely regarded as a fool.
D. Hamlet’s insanity is feigned; Polonius’ foolishness is genuine.

• Topic #3
Just as foils can help show similarities and differences between characters, parallel events can help clarify likenesses and contrasts between issues and characters’ responses to them. Discuss Shakespeare’s use of parallel plots and scenes throughout the play, showing their effects on characterization and thematic development.

Outline
I. Thesis Statement: Shakespeare uses parallel plots and scenes in Hamlet to clarify and heighten similarities and differences between issues and the characters’ responses to them.

II. Sons avenging murdered fathers
A. Hamlet, Laertes, and Fortinbras are all sons seeking revenge for murdered fathers.
B. The Player recites a scene at Hamlet’s request depicting Pyrrhus’ murder of Priam for the murder of Achilles, Pyrrhus’ father.

III. Characters spying on one another
A. Polonius arranges for Reynaldo to spy on Laertes.
B. Claudius and Gertrude solicit the help of Horatio, then Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, then Ophelia, to spy on Hamlet.
C. Claudius and Polonius eavesdrop on Hamlet and Ophelia.
D. Polonius eavesdrops on Hamlet and Gertrude.

IV. Characters advising one another.
A. Polonius advises both Laertes and Ophelia.
B. Both Laertes and Hamlet advise Ophelia.
C. Claudius advises Laertes.
D. Hamlet advises Gertrude.

V. The dumb show and Play re-enact the murder of the King by Claudius.

VI. Ghost speaks only to Hamlet.
A. Act I: visible to the sentinels, but calls Hamlet aside to speak to him alone.
B. Act III: invisible to Gertrude, still reserving speech only for Hamlet.

VII. Hamlet asks characters not to reveal information.
A. Hamlet makes the soldiers (Act I) swear not to tell what they have seen.
B. Hamlet confides in Rosencrantz and Guildenstern that he is not really insane.
C. Hamlet makes Gertrude promise not to reveal his pretended insanity.

**Topic #4**

Hamlet is often regarded as a play about an indecisive man, unable to take action. Explore the textual evidence for the various theories which attempt to explain Hamlet’s inaction or delay in seeking revenge for his father’s murder: lack of opportunity; too much thought and analysis; melancholy; Oedipus complex; doubt about the honesty of the Ghost; and doubts about his own ambitious motives.

**Outline**

I. Thesis Statement: For many readers, Hamlet’s seeming inability to avenge his father’s death is the central issue of the play. His indecision is often cited as the “tragic flaw” which ultimately causes his death. Critics generally support one of six theories to explain Hamlet’s inaction: lack of opportunity; too much thought and analysis; his melancholy; an Oedipus complex; his doubt about the honesty of the Ghost; and his doubts about his own ambitious motives.

II. Lack of opportunity

A. Hamlet is alone with virtually every other character except Laertes.
B. When Hamlet is alone with Claudius, the King is at prayer, and Hamlet desists rather than send him to Heaven.

III. Too much thought

A. Act II, Scene 2: Hamlet tells Rosencrantz and Guildenstern that “there is nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it so.”
B. Act III, Scene 1: Hamlet says, “conscience does make cowards of us all, / And thus the native hue of resolution / Is sicklied o’er with the pale cast of thought, and enterprises of great pitch and moment, with this regard their currents turn awry, and lose the name of action.”
C. Act IV, Scene 4: Hamlet debates whether his inaction is caused by “Bestial oblivion” or by “some craven scruple / Of thinking too precisely on th’ event . . . ”

IV. Melancholy

A. Claudius urges Hamlet to snap out of his mourning, which he terms “obstinate condolement,” and “unmanly.”
B. Hamlet soliloquizes, “But break my heart, for I must hold my tongue.”
C. Hamlet’s apparent mood swings, which appear to onlookers as madness, would have been in keeping with symptoms of the ailment known as melancholia.

V. Oedipus complex

A. Hamlet makes frequent references to how little time has passed between King Hamlet’s death and Gertrude’s remarriage.
B. Hamlet refers to Claudius as “dear mother,” since “man and wife is one flesh.”
C. Claudius now functions as Hamlet’s father; in Oedipal terms, to kill Claudius would clear the path to Gertrude’s bed.
D. Following Polonius’ murder, Hamlet seems obsessed with the physical aspects of Gertrude’s remarriage, and extracts her promise to abstain from Claudius’ bed.

VI. Doubt about the honesty of the Ghost

A. Act I: Hamlet asserts that “this vision here, / It is an honest Ghost.”
B. Act II: He is uncertain—“The spirit that I have seen / May be a devil [who] abuses me to damn me.”
C. Act III: He tells Horatio that Claudius’ reaction to the Mousetrap will reveal if “It is a damned Ghost that we have seen.”
D. Act III: When Claudius bolts, Hamlet confidently tells Horatio, “I’ll take the Ghost’s word for a thousand pound.”

VII. Doubts about his own ambitious motives
A. Act III: Hamlet tells Ophelia that although he is moderately virtuous, “yet I could accuse me of such things that it were better my mother had not borne me: I am very proud, revengeful, ambitious. . . .”
B. Act III: Hamlet tells Rosencrantz that his “distemper” is because “I lack advancement,” meaning that while Claudius occupies the throne, Hamlet cannot.
C. Hamlet tells Horatio that Claudius had “Popped in between th’ election and my hopes, . . .” indicating that the Prince had anticipated being chosen by the people to succeed his father.

• Topic #5
Authors often use physical weakness, disease, or deformity to symbolize or suggest mental, emotional, or spiritual illness or decay. Beneath the surface action of Hamlet runs an undercurrent of imagery of disease as opposed to healthfulness. Trace the motif of health and physical well-being as opposed to disease, illness, and weakness throughout the play. Show how Shakespeare links the physical symptoms with spiritual and political conditions.

Outline
I. Thesis Statement: Shakespeare uses imagery of disease, illness, and weakness to suggest physical, spiritual, or political illness or decay in Hamlet.

II. The idea of Hamlet’s madness being caused by external events pervades the whole play.

III. Act I: When Hamlet follows the Ghost apart, Marcellus remarks that “Something is rotten in the state of Denmark.”

IV. Act III
A. In his “To be, or not to be” speech, Hamlet notes that sleep/death would end the “heartache, and the thousand natural shocks That flesh is heir to!” (III, 1).
B. Claudius tells Polonius that Hamlet’s conversation with Ophelia did not seem to show either love or madness: “There’s something in his soul O’er which his melancholy sits on brood, And I do doubt the hatch and the disclose Will be some danger; . . .”
C. When, after the Dumb Show and aborted Play, Guildenstern tells Hamlet that Claudius is in “Marvelous [distemper],” Hamlet says it would make more sense to send for a doctor than for him, “for me to put him to his purgation would perhaps plunge him into more choler.”
D. He tells Rosencrantz that he cannot “Make you a wholesome answer; my wit’s diseased”.
E. When Claudius explains his plan to ship Hamlet to England, Rosencrantz agrees: “The cess of majesty dies not alone, . . . Never alone did the King sigh, but with a general groan”.
F. When Hamlet is unable or unwilling to kill the praying Claudius, opting for a time when Claudius’ soul will be “damned and black As hell,” he says, “This physic but prolongs thy sickly days”.
G. As he chides Gertrude, Hamlet tells her that her unacknowledged, unconfessed “trespass . . . will but skin and film the ulcerous place / Whiles rank corruption, mining all within, Infects unseen”.
H. Claudius, informed by Gertrude that Hamlet has murdered Polonius, says he erred in allowing Hamlet to remain at large, and “like the owner of a foul disease, to keep it from divulging, let it feed / Even on the pith of life”—thus reversing the image of insidious infection to apply to Hamlet’s crime rather than to Gertrude’s offense.

V. Act IV
A. In regard to the letter which Claudius sends to England, ordering Hamlet’s murder, the King soliloquizes, “Do it, England, / For like the hectic in my blood he rages, / And thou must cure me”.

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B. When Gertrude unwillingly agrees to meet with “importunate, indeed distract” Ophelia, the Queen remarks on her own “sick soul (as sin’s true nature is). . . .”

VI. Act V
A. As the sword fight is set to begin, Claudius explains how he will drink to Hamlet’s health, which is the ultimate irony—having arranged for Hamlet’s murder either by the sword or the cup.

Criticism: An Approach to Hamlet

There is, perhaps, no well-known passage in Shakespeare that has been found so perplexing as that in which Hamlet communes with himself between the preparation of the play to catch the conscience of the king and its performance—’To be, or not to be, that is the question . . .’ It can perplex for various reasons, one of them being the variety of different explanations of crucial phrases that can reasonably be made. (In the Furness Variorum edition the text completely disappears for a couple of pages whilst a footnote marshals conflicting interpretations of the opening and general tenor; at a rough estimate the 34 lines of the soliloquy have some 440 lines of small-type commentary.) Another reason is that the speech is almost too well-known for its features to be seen distinctly, as Charles Lamb said:

I confess myself utterly unable to appreciate that celebrated soliloquy in Hamlet, beginning, ’To be, or not to be,’ or to tell whether it be good, bad, or indifferent; it has been so handled and pawed about by declamatory boys and men, and torn so inhumanly from its living place and principle of continuity in the play, till it has become to me a perfectly dead member.

Perhaps we need not be too much dismayed; the meaning may be simpler—even if in some ways subtler—than is commonly supposed. Since the speech is crucial I must ask your indulgence whilst I read it, indicating as best I may the stopping of the good Quarto, which is considerably lighter than that in most current editions.

To be, or not to be, that is the question,
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? To die, to sleep
No more, and by a sleep to say we end
The heartache, and the thousand natural shocks
That flesh is heir to; ‘tis a consummation
Devoutly to be wished. To die, to sleep;
To sleep, perchance to dream: ay, there's the rub;
For in that sleep of death what dreams may come
When we have shuffled off this mortal coil,
Must give us pause: there's the respect
That makes calamity of so long life;
For who would bear the whips and scorns of time,
Th' oppressor's wrong, the proud man's contumely,
The pangs of disprized love, the law's delay,
The insolence of office, and the spurns
That patient merit of th' unworthy takes,
When he himself might his quietus make
With a bare bodkin? who would these fardels bear,
To grunt and sweat under a weary life,
But that the dread of something after death,
The undiscovered country, from whose bourn
No traveller returns, puzzles the will,
And makes us rather bear those ills we have
Than fly to others that we know not of?
Thus conscience does make cowards of us all,
And thus the native hue of resolution
Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought,
And enterprises of great pith and moment,
With this regard, their currents turn awry,
And lose the name of action. . . .

There is no need for me to do more than remind you of the main puzzles. Does 'To be, or not to be' refer to a contemplated action, to the continuation of Hamlet's life, or to survival after death? When he speaks of the 'The undiscover'd country from whose bourn No traveller returns', has he forgotten the Ghost, or has he given up belief in its honesty? What is the meaning of that 'conscience' that makes cowards of us all, or indeed 'thought'? And so on. It is of course clear that among the thoughts in Hamlet's mind are thoughts of action against the King, of suicide, and of the nature of life after death, but the transitions are not clear, and as soon as we attempt to give an exact paraphrase we run into difficulties. At this point we may resort to Dr. Johnson, whose note on the passage begins:

Of this celebrated soliloquy, which bursting from a man distracted with contrariety of desires, and overwhelmed with the magnitude of his own purposes, is connected rather in the speaker's mind, than on his tongue, I shall endeavour to discover the train, and to shew how one sentiment produces another.

This he proceeds to do, and I must say with considerable success, so far as success is possible; but the essential point is in his opening comment: it is the speech of a man 'distracted with contrariety of desires', and the connexions are 'rather in the speaker's mind, than on his tongue'. In other words it is not paraphrasable, and the reasons why it is not so are of some interest.

It is of course true that poetry that without loss of meaning could be put into other words would cease to be poetry. But we all know that there is a great deal of poetry of which we can usefully make for ourselves a tentative prose translation as a way of getting to grips with the full poetic meaning. Now there are passages in Shakespeare (as indeed in other poets) where even this tentative and exploratory procedure is of a very limited usefulness indeed, for what we are given is not the poetic apprehension of thought, but thought in the process of formation. Such a passage is the speech of Macbeth in the moment of temptation ('This supernatural soliciting Cannot be ill; cannot be good . . .') where we are directly aware both of the emotional and the bodily accompaniments of a state of being issuing in a conception that will not easily yield itself to conceptual forms (my thought, whose murder yet is but fantastical). Such again is that other great soliloquy, 'If it were done, when 'tis done . . . ' where the meaning is composed of an emotional current running full tilt against an attempted logical control. In the Hamlet passage the pace is more meditative, but such ideas as it contains are held loosely in relation to a current of feeling which is the main determinant of meaning. And this is important, because the thought that is struggling for expression is one that can only be clarified on certain conditions: the necessary condition, as we saw at the end of the last lecture, is an emotional integrity and a wholeness of the personality that Hamlet has not, so far, achieved, from which indeed, as soon as the soliloquy is ended, he decisively withdraws.

The thought struggling for expression to which I just now referred is contained in the arresting opening line, 'To be, or not to be, that is the question . . .' Dr. Johnson expressed his sense of the opening in these words:
Hamlet, knowing himself injured in the most enormous and atrocious degree, and seeing no means of redress, but such as must expose him to the extremity of hazard, meditates on his situation in this manner: Before I can form any rational scheme of action under this pressure of distress, it is necessary to decide, whether, after our present state, we are to be or not to be. That is the question, which, as it shall be answered, will determine, whether 'tis nobler, and more suitable to the dignity of reason, to suffer the outrages of fortune patiently, or to take arms against them, and by opposing end them, though perhaps with the loss of life.

Now I feel sure that Johnson is right in implicitly rejecting the idea of suicide at this point, and I think that the idea of immortality is indeed very close to the forefront of Hamlet's consciousness. But there is that in Johnson's phrasing with partially obscures the full implications of the crucial phrase. The primary thought is not whether 'after our present state' we are to be or not to be; it is the question of present being.

In the Fourth Book of Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy* there is a notable passage that throws some light on this. Wicked men, says Boethius, are fundamentally 'deditute of all forces'.

For why do they follow vices, forsaking virtues? By ignorance of that which is good? But what is more devoid of strength than blind ignorance? Or do they know what they should embrace, but passion driveth them headlong the contrary way? So also intemperance makes them frail, since they cannot strive against vice. Or do they wittingly and willingly forsake goodness and decline to vices? But in this sort they leave not only to be powerful, but even to be at all (*sed omnino esse desinunt*). For they which leave the common end of all things which are, leave also being. Which may perhaps seem strange to some, that we should say evil men are not at all, who are the greatest part of men: but yet it is so. For I deny not that evil men are evil, but withal I say that purely and simply they are not. For as thou mayest call a carcase a dead man, but not simply a man, so I confess that the vicious are evil, but I cannot grant that they are absolutely. For that is which retaineth order, and keepeth nature, but that which faileth from this leaveth also to be that which is in his own nature.

I feel the more justified in invoking this passage for the light it may throw in so far as it is clear from *Macbeth* that Shakespeare was deeply familiar with the traditional doctrine of the nothingness of evil—*malum nihil est*, evil is nothing, as Boethius says a few lines after the endings of the passage I have just given. Not indeed that evil deeds and evil passions do not exist; it is simply that they lead away from what all men naturally desire, and for which goodness and being are alternative names. Neither do I offer the passage as anything like a direct source. I quote it simply as an indication of the kind of ideas with which Shakespeare and his educated contemporaries were likely to be familiar, and therefore of the implications of language that would be present to them, but that we are likely to miss: in the passage that I have quoted, in the translation of I.T. of 1609, the words 'to be', 'are' and 'is' are used absolutely to indicate essential being. The guiding theme of the *Consolation* is that to be free of the shackles of passion and ignorance is to rise superior to Fortune, so that suffering itself becomes a positive act. It is for this very reasons we may notice, that Hamlet admires Horatio.

Since my dear soul was mistress of her choice,
And could of men distinguish, her election
Hath seal'd thee for herself; for thou hast been
As one, in suffering all, that suffers nothing;
A man that Fortune's buffets and rewards
Hath ta'en with equal thanks; and bless'd are those
Whose blood and judgment are so well commingled
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 hearts
As I do thee.

Hamlet's deep underlying concern is with essential being.

What it seems to me that Hamlet is saying at the opening of the soliloquy is that what it means to be is the question of all questions; 'and this is so,' he goes on, 'whether we believe with Boethius that the blows of Fortune must be endured, or whether we think it better actively to combat evil—which, in my case, is likely to result in my own death'—

Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,
And by opposing, end them? to die, to sleep
No more...

But by now there is no pretence of following a logical sequence of thought; one idea blends with another—killing Claudius, killing oneself, the well-nigh insupportable troubles of life, the fear of futurity—all carried by currents of half-expressed emotion, so that the thoughts the Prince is trying to bring into some order are eroded and carried away on a stream of feeling. Now the strongest feeling, which takes charge with the equation of death and sleep, is, as we have seen, the regressive desire to evade, shuffle off, the complexities of consciousness. Of that I do not think there can be any doubt at all—

'tis a consummation
Devoutly to be wished. To die, to sleep

But if life is a load, death, or what may come after death, is even more to be feared. As Mr. John Vyvyan has remarked in his recent book, *The Shakespearean Ethic*, 'Throughout the long soliloquy, every idea is negative. To live is to "bear the whips and scorns of time", to die is to fly to other wills "we know not of". Even the possibility of joy is excluded'; and 'when life loses joy, it also loses meaning'. For Hamlet, therefore, in his present state of conflicting feelings and restricted consciousness, no solution is possible, neither of his great problem, 'to be, or not to be', nor of the problems that entirely depend on an answer to that overriding question—the problems, I mean, of how to face life and death with something quite other than fear and aversion. What he reproaches himself with is excess of conscience—'Thus conscience does make cowards of us all'—whereas it is quite clear that, whether we take the word in the sense of reflection and consciousness or in the more usual sense of moral concern (and I agree with D.G. James that here both meanings are present) what Hamlet needs is not less of conscience but more.

Thus conscience does make cowards of us all,
And thus the native hue of resolution
Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought,
And enterprises of great pith and moment,
With this regard, their currents turn awry,
And lose the name of action. . . .

It does not matter in Hamlet's mind the thought of suicide merges with the thought of killing the king; what matters is the quite unambiguous sense of health giving away to disease, a loss of purpose and a lapsing from positive direction. What the soliloquy does in short is to bring to a head our recognition of the dependence of thought on deeper levels of consciousness, and to make plain beyond all doubt that the set of Hamlet's consciousness is towards a region where no resolution is possible at all.
Criticism: Hamlet and Revenge

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May not the peculiar power of the play be based to a large extent on our ability to sympathize with Hamlet and yet judge him for the course he pursues? And is this not exactly our response to Shakespeare's other great tragic figures? It has been harder to admit our intuitive judgment of Hamlet because his tragic choice commands not merely our sympathy but our admiration. In the first place, his situation is much closer to our own than that of Macbeth or Antony or Lear. All men hunger for revenge. The defiant refusal to submit to injury, the desire to assert one's identity by retaliation, the gnawing ache to assault injustice by giving measure for measure—these are reflected in our daily response to even the mildest of insults. In the serious drama from the beginning of time, the dilemma of the revenger has been one of the universal problems of man writ large.

An even more important reason for our sympathy is the motivation that drives Hamlet. Macbeth, Lear, and Antony obviously violate moral law, and for selfish ends. We suffer with them but for human reasons, for the agony they bring on themselves. Hamlet's motivation is far more complex and, to a great extent, we identify with him for solid moral reasons. In large part his course to the fifth act is the result of his moral sensitivity, his unflinching discernment of evil and his determination that it shall not thrive. We admire his hatred of corruption and his vision of what man could and should be. Even as he is engulfed by the evil against which he takes arms, we sense that he would have been a lesser man had he refused the challenge.

At this point, the reader may object that my discussion of Hamlet's universal appeal contradicts my earlier insistence on the play's Christian perspective. Throughout the preceding pages, it may have seemed that I was forcing Hamlet into a straitjacket of Christian morality, thereby seriously restricting its meaning and impact. This has been far from my intention. Paradoxical as it may seem, I believe that we can understand Hamlet's unrivaled power to move emotions and stimulate thought only when we grant the basic Christian perspective in which the action is placed. To do so requires no knowledge of religious doctrine, no scholarly investigation into Elizabethan theories about ghosts or the meditations of Luis de Granada or archaic meanings of "conscience." Shakespeare gives us everything we need to know. In short, we must take the play on its own terms. Only when we cease searching for explanations outside it, whether in pagan codes or obsolete theatrical conventions, can we respond directly to the play itself.

Once we do so, we sense that the Ghost is ominous, we sense that Hamlet's early surrender to rage can lead only to chaos and destruction but that his later serenity is somehow his salvation—in short, we sense that the desire to inflict private punishment can lead only to evil. The social compact is largely based on the belief that man can fulfill his special potential only when there is social order, that the unrestrained private will leads inevitably to anarchy and that man must willingly assent to certain fiat's of authority. The consensus of civilized man, therefore, is that discipline of emotions, obedience to established law, and love (or, at least, respect) for one's fellow man are moral goods, whereas surrender to emotions, defiance of law, and hatred of (or, at least, indifference to) one's fellow man are moral ills. By granting the Christian perspective of Hamlet, we thus do not narrow the ethical base of the play; we broaden it. Christian ideas and symbols become merely familiar signs by which we recognize the basic view of man held throughout the civilized world.

At the same time, we recognize a major reason for Hamlet's enduring appeal. In Hamlet's dilemma, we find the dilemma of civilized man, a dilemma that becomes more profound as civilization becomes progressively restrictive. In our own day, the dilemma looms large. Caught in an age of increasing frustration, hemmed in by civil law and social codes, lost in the mass, many have raised Hamlet's questions. What is man if his chief good be but passive resignation to a will other than his own? The law not only delays but winks; corruption thrives; the establishment condones dishonesty, injustice, and brutality in the name of order. When is...
obedience merely a euphemism for cowardice? In the modern world, many have argued that man can find his "being" only by trusting his instinct and obeying his own private moral code—only by defying, or at least ignoring, the dictates of civil and social law. Their challenge is epitomized in the thesis of Gertrude Stein's play cryptically entitled *Yes Is for a Very Young Man*.

Hamlet arrives at the opposite conclusion. In the first part of the play, a very young man defiantly shouts "No," but he is transformed in the fifth act when he finds his being in "Yes." It is for this reason, perhaps, that several readers have sensed what they call a "tragic retreat" in the play. Hamlet does, indeed, retreat from rebellion, a fact that a modern reader may regret. But does Shakespeare invite us to view Hamlet's retreat as a weakness? In one sense, Hamlet is medieval man teetering on the brink of the modern world. He defiantly asserts his own being against all limitation, but he ultimately accepts limitation as the only means of freeing himself to find that being. Some today may find his retreat from defiance a step backward, but such a reading seems clearly at odds with the play. Hamlet does not sink into passive resignation; he rises to affirmative reconciliation. He has not abandoned his search for being. His search has ended in the serene knowledge that "the readiness is all."

Theories of tragedy are many, but common to almost all is a basic pattern that fits Hamlet. Man in some way hurls himself against the barricades that confine him, whether of family or society or universal order or faith. In some way he defies the established code—challenges it, questions it, tests it—and is ultimately shattered by it. In the struggle, we see his greatness, but we know that he must go down. In the truly great tragedies, the tragic hero at his fall in some way attains a new awareness of the mystery of life and of his own role in that mystery. Thus the tragic self stands at the end inviolate in a new dignity. This applies no less to Hamlet than to Oedipus and King Lear.

For my part, this long study has led for the first time to an awareness that many strikingly diverse and even contradictory views of *Hamlet* can be illuminating. The Christian may find the fundamental question the play raises to be "How can man be saved?" The existentialist, "What is man's essence?" Are not both right? The Freudian may view Hamlet's problem as one of sexual obsession; the Nietzschean, as a conflict between the Dionysian motive of instinct, the barbarizing principle that leads to chaos, and the Apollonian motive of reconciliation, the civilizing principle that leads to order. Is there not truth in both views? From Aristotle's familiar definition of the tragic hero to Murray Krieger's discussion of the "tragic visionary"—the ethical man who undergoes a cosmic shock, finds his ethical assumptions inadequate, and either yields in resignation to the demands of ethical absolutes or "surge[s] toward the demoniac"—every sensitive analysis of the tragic experience can lend new insight.

**Criticism: Overviews of Hamlet**

David Bevington

*Bevington presents an in-depth survey of the dramatic action and major themes of Hamlet. The critic initially focuses on Hamlet's role in the play, examining his interactions with the other characters as well as his several soliloquies in an attempt to determine his "tragic flaw," the defect in a tragic hero which leads to his downfall. (A soliloquy is a speech delivered while the speaker is alone, devised to inform the reader of what the character is thinking or to provide essential information concerning other participants in the action.) Bevington also comments on the dramatic structure of Hamlet, especially Shakespeare's balancing the tragedy with many foils. (A foil refers to any literary character that through strong contrast accentuates the distinctive characteristics of another.) Perhaps the most obvious foil to Hamlet is Laertes, who acts in haste upon hearing of his father's murder, while Hamlet himself delays his revenge. The critic also assesses the play's language, describing various instances of punning (a kind of wordplay which manipulates two words with different meanings based on their similarity of sound) which occur throughout the text. Finally,*
Bevington discusses metaphors such as clothing, acting, and disease, which all contribute to the predominant image patterns in the play.

It is appropriate that for modern critics *Hamlet* should be Shakespeare's greatest dramatic enigma, for misunderstanding is the unavoidable condition of Hamlet's quest for certainties. Not only is he baffled by riddling visions and by commands seemingly incapable of fulfillment, but he is the victim of misinterpretation by those around him. Well may the dying Hamlet urge his friend Horatio to "report me and my cause aright To the unsatisfied" [V. ii. 340], for no one save Horatio has caught more than a glimpse of Hamlet's true situation. We as omniscient audience, hearing the inner thoughts of Claudius as well as of Hamlet and learning of Polonius' or Laertes' secret plottings with the king, should remember that we know vastly more than the play's characters, and that this discrepancy between our viewpoint and theirs is one of Shakespeare's richest sources of dramatic irony.

The basis of misunderstanding, and hence of Hamlet's estrangement, is the secret murder. Claudius, before the opening of the play, has slain his brother by such cunning means that no mortal suspects him—not even at first the sorrowing Hamlet, until the ghost's horrid news awakens the unstated imaginings of Hamlet's "prophetic soul." Ever the masterly politician, Claudius has engineered his own succession to the throne in place of his nephew Hamlet not by usurpation, but by full consent of the Danish court. Claudius is to outward appearances an apt choice. Polonius and other reputedly sage counselors welcome the rule of one so fit for soothing public utterance and for pragmatic foreign diplomacy. Claudius, to his credit, disarms the threat of invasion by young Fortinbras of Norway that hangs so ominously over the beginning of the play. The king's instructions to the ambassadors, Voltemand and Cornelius, are seasoned by years of hard political calculation. His marriage with the dead king's widow, even if technically incestuous, gives an aura of continuity to the new reign. It is without conscious irony that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, appointed guardians of the unpredictable Hamlet, echo great Elizabethan commonplaces in their defense of legitimate monarchical authority. The life of their king is threatened, and they know that majesty "Dies not alone, but like a gulf doth draw What's near it with it" [III. iii. 16-17]. Ophelia, ignorant of the murder, cannot fathom the sudden and vindictive hostility of one who had professed love to her "In honorable fashion" [I. iii. 111]. Passively becoming part of a scheme designed, as far as she can tell, to help Hamlet recover his wits, Ophelia instead loses her own. Her brother Laertes' rashness is similarly made plausible, even if it cannot be condoned, by his total unawareness of Hamlet's reasons for opposing the king and Polonius. Only in the final scene does Laertes perceive too late that he is caught like "a woodcock to mine own springe" [V. ii. 306], and is "justly killed with mine own treachery" [V. ii. 307].

Hamlet by contrast is from the first a stranger in the court of Denmark, despite his position as son of the dead king and as "most immediate to our throne" after Claudius [I. ii. 109]. An outsider, he returns from years of advanced study at Wittenberg to a society he considers too worldly and corrupted. It is "as a stranger" [I. v. 165] that he shares with Horatio a secret knowledge of there being "more things in heaven and earth" [I. v. 166] than are dreamt of in mere philosophy. He upbraids the Danish for their heavy drinking, a custom better broken than observed. Well before he learns of the murder, he spurns the hypocrisy of meats baked for a funeral coldly furnishing forth the wedding festivities of his uncle-father and aunt-mother. He knows not "seems." Hamlet's innate antipathy to false appearances, exacerbated by his mother's overhasty wedding, helps explain both his suspicion of others' motives and their bafflement at his seeming caprice. Claudius is sincere in his attempts to make a reconciliation with a young prince who is cherished by his mother and beloved by the common people. Gertrude can only suppose that her son is offended by her infidelity to the memory of her dead husband—for she like the others apparently knows nothing of the actual murder—and so she fondly hopes that Hamlet will marry Ophelia and settle down into tranquil domesticity. Polonius, whose routine it is to make intelligence reports on potential troublemakers, finds an easy clue to Hamlet's "madness" in Ophelia's rejection of him. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are equally convinced that Hamlet's malady is political—his lack of "advancement" to the throne.
These answers formulated by the Danish court to explain Hamlet's mystery are not unusually obtuse. They are the guesswork of shrewd observers who merely lack knowledge of Hamlet's awful truth. The answers are in fact all valid in their limited ways. Gertrude may well fear that Hamlet's distemper needs no other explanation than "His father's death and our o'erhasty marriage" [II. ii. 57]. Hamlet becomes a mirror reflecting the conscience of each observer, and the guilty marriage is what Gertrude sees in herself. "You go not till I set you up a glass," he exhorts his mother, "Where you may see the inmost part of you" [III. iv. 20]. Claudius, having reason to surmise more than most, has most to fear. Polonius creates a fantasy of love based on his own stratagems in matchmaking, but his fiction only exaggerates Hamlet's real obsession with feminine frailty. When Rosencrantz and Guildenstern speak of ambition, they are talking mostly about themselves; yet Hamlet does belatedly admit, at least to Horatio, that Claudius has "Popped in between th' election and my hopes" [V. ii. 65]. All these explorations of motive have meaning to us who know the prime cause.

What Hamlet objects to is the oversimplification and the prying that destroys the integrity of his whole and complex being. "If circumstances lead me, I will find Where truth is hid, though it were hid indeed Within the center," opines Polonius, irritating us as well as Hamlet with his officious claims to omniscience. Similarly, Hamlet is incensed at Rosencrantz and Guildenstern for supposing they can sound his inner nature more easily than one might play a recorder. "You would play upon me, you would seem to know my stops, you would pluck out the heart of my mystery," he accuses them, adding with a pun, "though you can fret me, you cannot play upon me" [III. ii. 364-66, 371-72]. Hamlet here expresses one of the most profound bases of our identification with his loneliness. Every human being is unique and believes that others can never fully understand or appreciate him. And every human being experiences some perverse delight in this proof of the world's callousness.

If, in his turn, Hamlet also indulges in amateur motive-hunting and so alienates those who would seek an accommodation with him, he merely typifies in dramatically heightened form a human tendency to prefer estrangement. His is, after all, an extraordinary situation. It is plausible that a young man so suddenly deprived of his father and confronted with evidence of his mother's fleshly weakness should generalize upon the depravity of the human condition, even in himself. Moreover Hamlet is intellectually inclined to searching out hidden meanings in events. The cold watch on the tower at midnight, the appearance of the ghost, and the cruel contrast between the ugly truth here revealed and the empty glitter of the court, impel him to the conclusion that "All is not well" [I. ii. 254]. Humanity itself, so potentially noble in reason and godlike in its infinite faculties, dissolves in his imaginative vision into a quintessence of dust. The goodly frame of nature becomes a "foul and pestilent congregation of vapors" [II. ii. 302-03]. Man's very being, infected by some "vicious mole [blemish] of nature" [I. iv. 24] inherited involuntarily at birth, overthrows "the pales and forts of reason" [I. iv. 28] and thereby corrupts the whole. Men are prisoners of their appetites, helpless to achieve the goodness so mockingly revealed by their philosophic quest for the ideal.

Overwhelmed by this negation, Hamlet can only suspect others of inconstancy. He need not overhear Polonius' scheme of using Ophelia to bait a trap, for Hamlet is predisposed to expect collusion. He has tested womankind by the behavior of his mother and knows them all to be false. "Frailty, thy name is woman" [I. ii. 146], he concludes in his first soliloquy. If Hamlet senses something amiss in Ophelia's suddenly returning his love letters to him, he only guesses intuitively what in fact Polonius has said to his daughter. She must learn to play a wary game to treat Hamlet's advances as "springes to catch woodcocks" [I. iii. 115], and to regard his holy vows as devices to undo her virginity. Princes are expected to claim their rights as libertines, in Polonius' complacent vision of the universal lewdness in human nature. However cruel in its treatment of Ophelia, Hamlet's response is in kind. He becomes afflicted by the ruthless mores prevailing in Denmark, because he has a distasteful business to accomplish. Only too late can he publicly acknowledge that he loved the fair Ophelia, stressing the tragedy of misunderstanding that has obliged him to destroy what he most cherished. Similarly he acknowledges too late his real respect for Laertes and his regret at their fatal enmity. These two men might in better times have loved one another. A chief source of the melancholic mood in Hamlet derives from this sense of lost opportunity.
Hamlet does grow harsh and cynical like his opponents. Yet he never ceases to tax himself as severely as he does the others. He is indeed much like them. Polonius, his seeming opposite in so many ways, is, like Hamlet, an inveterate punster. To whom else but Polonius should Hamlet direct the taunt of "Words, words, words" [II. ii. 192]? The aged counselor recalls that in his youth he "suffered much extremity for love, very near this" [II. ii. 189-90], and he has been an actor at the university. Polonius too has advice for the players: "Seneca cannot be too heavy, nor Plautus too light" [II. ii. 400-01]. When Hamlet jibes at "so capital a calf " [III. ii. 105-06] enacting Julius Caesar, killed in the Capitol, he reinforces the parallel to his own playacting and anticipates the slaying of Polonius behind the arras. If Hamlet is a mirror to the others, the reflection works both ways.

Perhaps the central reflection of this sort is between Hamlet and Claudius. Not only has Claudius taken Hamlet's mother and his crown, but Claudius is a prisoner of circumstance, burdened with a guilty responsibility, unable to rid himself of his enemy by forthright action. Hamlet is a constant danger to the king, and yet no plausible grounds can at first be discovered for proceeding against Hamlet. Only after the "mousetrap" play do both of them know that action is imperative; and yet both of them find their subsequent moves thwarted by unforeseen circumstances and deceptive appearances. Claudius is the only character other than Hamlet whom we overhear in soliloquy, and we learn on this occasion that Claudius too cannot resolve seemingly impossible alternatives. How is he to retain the queen, whom he has won by sinful lust, and at the same time free his tortured soul of guilt? It is ironically appropriate that Claudius' prayer should offer Hamlet his sole opportunity for successful revenge, an opportunity lost because Claudius gives the semblance of being in a state of contrition. Ultimately Hamlet and Claudius slay one another in a finale that neither could have anticipated.

Sharing the weaknesses of those he reviles, Hamlet turns his most unsparing criticisms upon himself. The appalling contrast between his uncle and father reminds him of the contrast between himself and Hercules—although when the fit of action is upon him he is as hardy as "The Nemean lion's nerve" [I. iv. 83]. "We are arrant knaves all," he warns Ophelia, "believe none of us" [III. i. 128]. Although more honest than most, Hamlet accounts himself unworthy to have been born: "I am very proud, revengeful, ambitious, with more offenses at my beck than I have thoughts to put them in, imagination to give them shape, or time to act them in" [III. i. 123-25]. His self-remonstrances repeatedly sound the note of generalization. He is like other men in being "a breeder of sinners" [III. i. 121], and he includes all mankind in his dilemma of action: "conscience doth make cowards of us all" [III. i. 82]. Paradoxically, although he characterizes himself as a vengeful man too full of sinful deeds, he reproaches himself most often for his failure to take arms against his sea of troubles. "O, what a rogue and peasant slave am I!" [II. ii. 550]. The son of a dear father murdered, he can only unpack his heart with words. Is this the result, he pondered, of "Bestial oblivion, or some craven scuple Of thinking too precisely on th' event" [IV. iv. 40-1]. Is he allowing himself to be paralyzed into inaction by his introspection, obscuring "the native hue of resolution" and "the pale cast of thought?" [III. i. 83-4]? If Hamlet asks this question and has no clear answer, we need not be surprised that it has tantalized modern criticism.

Several limits can be placed upon the search for an explanation of Hamlet's apparent hesitation to avenge. He is not ineffectual under ordinary circumstances. Elizabethan theories of melancholy did not suppose the sufferer to be made necessarily inactive. Hamlet has a deserved reputation in Denmark for manliness and princely demeanor. He keeps up his fencing practice and will "win at the odds" [V. ii. 212] against Laertes. He threatens with death those who would restrain him from speaking with the ghost—even his friend Horatio—and stabs the concealed Polonius unflinchingly. On the sea voyage to England he boards a pirate ship singlehanded in the grapple, after having arranged without remorse for the deaths of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. In light of these deeds, Hamlet's self-accusations are signs of burning impatience in one who would surely act if he could. His contemplations of suicide follow similarly upon his frustrated perceptions of an impasse; suicide is a logical alternative when action appears meaningless, even if suicide must be rejected on grounds of Christian faith.
Such considerations turn our attention from Hamlet's supposed "fault" or "tragic flaw" to the context of his world and its philosophical absurdities. Wherein can he find trust and certitude? "Say, why is this?" he begs his father's ghost. "Wherefore? what should we do?" [I. iv. 57]. According to popular Elizabethan belief, both Catholic and Protestant, spirits from the dead could indeed "assume a pleasing shape" [II. ii. 599-600], in order to abuse a person in Hamlet's vulnerable frame of mind and so lead him to damnation. If Hamlet's plan to test the ghost's message by the "mousetrap" play causes him to wonder about his own cowardice and inconstancy, the accusations are directed against the impotent and self-contradictory nature of his situation.

Even after the clear revelation of Claudius' guilt at Hamlet's play, the exact plan of action remains anything but clear. Hamlet must face the ghost once again to explain why he "lets go by Th' important acting of your dread command" [III. iv. 107-08]; yet his purpose in confronting Gertrude with her weakness is the laudable one of returning her to at least an outward custom of virtue. Having earlier been uncertain of appearances in the apparition of his father, Hamlet now is deceived and hence delayed in his resolve by the semblance of Claudius' praying. Hamlet has always believed that heavenly justice will prevail among men: "Foul deeds will rise, Though all the earth o'erwhelm them, to men's eyes" [I. ii. 256-57]. Murder, though it have no tongue, "will speak With most miraculous organ" [II. ii. 593-94]. Nevertheless, man's perception of that divine revelation, and his role in aiding the course of justice, are obscured by man's own corruption and blindness. Whenever Hamlet moves violently, he moves in error. Horatio, in summing up the play, speaks tellingly of "accidental judgments, casual slaughters" [V. ii. 382], and of "purposes mistook Fall'n on th' inventors' heads" [V. ii. 384-85]. The judgment applies to Hamlet as to Laertes and Claudius. Hamlet has already realized that he must pay the price of heaven's displeasure for killing Polonius, just as Polonius himself has paid the price for his own meddling. "Heaven hath pleased it so, To punish me with this, and this with me." Such fitting reciprocity can be brought about only by the far-reaching arm of providence. The engineer must be "Hoist with his own petar" [III. iv. 207].

Hamlet quests for clear action, but it mockingly eludes him. He yearns to be like Fortinbras, proceeding resolutely in a military action against Poland, but perceives at the same time that Fortinbras, in his absurd campaign for a patch of barren ground, for "this straw," for "an eggshell," must risk two thousand souls and a kingly fortune. The tomb in which these vast numbers will be laid to rest for no purpose anticipates the graveyard of Yorick and Ophelia, reaching back in its universal history to King Alexander and to Adam, the first gravedigger. The magnificent Alexander and imperious Caesar, renowned for exploits greater than those of Fortinbras, are now turned to clay and can serve only to stop a bunghole. This generalized vision of earthly vanity is no mere excuse for Hamlet's irresolution, for it shows the benign intention of providence in achieving a coherence beyond the grasp of human comprehension. Fortinbras of course succeeds politically where Hamlet must fail, and is chosen by Hamlet to restore Denmark to political health; but to acknowledge this discrepancy is merely to confirm the distance between order on earth and the higher perfection which Hamlet conceives.

It is only when Hamlet has come to terms with the absurdity of human action, and has resigned himself to the will of heaven, that a way is opened for him at last. Fittingly, he achieves this detachment in the company of Horatio. However much Horatio's philosophic skepticism may limit his own ability to perceive those "things in heaven and earth" [I. v. 116] that Hamlet would have him observe, Horatio remains the companion from whom Hamlet has most to learn. Hamlet can trust his friend not to angle for advancement, or to reveal the terrible secret of royal murder. Best of all, Horatio is "As one in suff'ring all that suffers nothing, A man that Fortune's buffets and rewards Hast ta'en with equal thanks" [III. ii. 66-8]. The true stoic, choosing to "suffer The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune" [III. i. 57] rather than futilely oppose them, is proof against the insidious temptation of worldly success as well as against disappointment. While other courtiers gravitate to Claudius with his seemingly magical formula for prospering, and so lose themselves in worldliness, Horatio sides with one who is sacrificed and so receives his commission as guardian of the truth. (pp. 1-7)
Structurally, the play of Hamlet is dominated by the pairing of various characters to reveal one as the "foil" of another. "I'll be your foil, Laertes" [V. ii. 255], says Hamlet, punning on the resemblance that elsewhere he seriously acknowledges: "by the image of my cause I see The portraiture of his" [V. ii. 77-8]. Laertes has returned from abroad to help celebrate the royal wedding; he loses a father by violent means and seeks vengeance. The common people, usually loyal to young Hamlet, are roused to a new hero-worship upon the occasion of Laertes' second return to Denmark. "Choose we! Laertes shall be king!" [IV. v. 107]. Ophelia too has been deprived of a father; so has Fortinbras. Hamlet stands at the center of these comparisons, the proper focus of the play. He is the composite man, graced as Ophelia observes with "The courtier's, soldier's, scholar's, eye, tongue, sword" [III. i. 151]. From each comparison we see another facet of his complex being, and another danger from extremes which he must learn to avoid.

We have already seen the similarities of Claudius and Polonius to Hamlet. Laertes, burdened with a responsibility like Hamlet's, moves to expedient action without scruple. He turns at first on Claudius, who is technically innocent of Polonius' death. The popular insurrection will simultaneously feed Laertes' revenge and his ambition. Presented with untested and partial evidence concerning Hamlet's part in Polonius' murder, Laertes would "cut his throat i' th' church" [IV. vii. 126]. He does in fact grapple with Hamlet in the graveyard, striking the first blow and prompting Hamlet to assure his rival that he is not "spleenitive and rash" [V. i. 261]. More than that, Laertes connives with the king in underhanded murder; it is Laertes who thinks of poisoning the sword's point with an unction already bought of a mountebank. This poison recalls the murder of King Hamlet and the murder of Gonzago. Purposes of this sort can only return to plague the inventor.

Ophelia's response to her father's death is quite opposite to her brother's, but no less a reflection on Hamlet's dilemma. Her mind is not equal to the buffets of fortune, and she will not draw her breath in pain. She wanders from her mad sexual fantasies to muddy death. If the gravediggers and the priest are to be believed, her dreams, once she has "shuffled off this mortal coil" [III. i. 66], must give us pause. Fortinbras is a more positive figure, since he withholds his hand against the Danes in vengeance of his father, choosing to inherit the Danish throne by diplomatic patience and canny timing rather than by battle; but at best his counsel is "greatly to find quarrel in a straw When honor's at the stake" [IV. iv. 55-6]. Horatio's philosophy of stoical indifference to fortune offers the greatest consolation to Hamlet, and yet it cannot predict the important outcome by which divinity will reveal itself in the fall of a sparrow.

Characters also serve as foils to one another as well as to Hamlet. Gertrude wishfully sees in Ophelia the blushing bride of Hamlet, innocently free from the compromises and surrenders which Gertrude has never mastered the strength to escape. Yet to Hamlet, Ophelia is no better than another Gertrude: both are tender of heart but submissive to the will of importunate men, and so are forced into uncharacteristic vices. Both would be other than what they are, and both receive Hamlet's exhortations to begin repentance by abstaining from pleasure. "Get thee to a nunnery"; "Assume a virtue if you have it not" [III. i. 120; III. iv. 160].

Hamlet's language puts much stress on the pun and other forms of wordplay. This habit of speech, so often a lapse in taste, is here appropriate to the portrayal of a keen mind tortured by alternatives. In his first appearance, Hamlet offers a double meaning in each of his answers to the king and queen. Because he is now both Claudius' cousin and son, Hamlet is "A little more than kin, and less than kind" [I. ii. 65]—too incestuously close, and yet neither kindly disposed nor bound by the legitimate ties of nature ("kind") as is a son to his true father. Denying that the clouds of sorrow still hang on him, Hamlet protests he is "too much in the sun" [I. ii. 67]—basking more than he wishes in the king's unctuous favor, and so, more a "son" than he thinks right. To his mother, who must cling to her worldly belief that the death of husbands and fathers is "common" or commonplace and hence to be taken in one's stride, Hamlet wryly counters: "Ay, madam, it is common" [I. ii. 74]. It is low, coarse, revolting.

In each double meaning Hamlet pierces to the heart of seeming. Mere forms, moods, or shapes of grief cannot denote him truly; he must discover the "absolute" in meaning and so quibbles with words and their deceptive
masks. When his friend Horatio says to Hamlet "There's no offense" [I. ii. 74], meaning conventionally that Horatio is not affronted by Hamlet's wild and whirling words on the battlements, Hamlet is quick to remember the larger issue of morality in Denmark: "Yes, by Saint Patrick, but there is, Horatio, And much offense too" [I. v. 136-37]. When Polonius, merely to encourage small talk, asks Hamlet "What is the matter" [II. ii. 193] that he reads, Hamlet will have no chitchat. What is the matter "Between who?" Small wonder that Hamlet exults in the gravedigger's playing upon the idiotic and profound question of the ownership of a grave: this one belongs to one that is not a woman, but who was a woman. "How absolute the knave is!" [V. i. 137]. This digger is the same natural philosopher who has explicated the three branches of acting—"to act, to do, and to perform" [V. i. 12].

In patterns of images, Hamlet employs metaphors of clothes, of acting, and of disease. Again, like the wordplay, these images aim at the discrepancy between a handsome exterior and corrupted inner being. Hamlet decries inky cloaks, "windy suspiration of forced breath" [I. ii. 79], and other appurtenances of mourning, even though he himself is still dressed in black and so is visibly separated from the wedding party at court. Polonius reveals his trust in the game of preserving appearances by his worldly advice to his son: "the apparel oft proclaims the man" [I. iii. 72]. This maxim loses its irony when quoted out of context. Osric's sterile infatuation with clothes and mannerisms serves as one last reminder of the world's hypocrisy that Hamlet can now regard with almost comic detachment. Hamlet as actor is a master of many styles, frightening Ophelia in his fouled stockings, ungartered "As if he had been loosed out of hell" [II. i. 80], or composing jingling love doggerel to be read solemnly in open court, or declaiming in an outmoded and stilted tragical rhetoric on the massacre of Troy. He is critical of the professional players' fondness for exaggerated gestures, interpolated bawdry, and overblown rhetoric, because they must aid him in a subtle resemblance of truth designed to lay bare a human conscience. They must hold "the mirror up to nature, to show virtue her own feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure" [III. ii. 22-4]. Acting becomes a process of reality in uncovering the veneer of court life.

At the center of this revelation is the figure of the dead King Hamlet, whose magnificent person has been "barked about Most lazar-like with vile and loathsome crust" [I. v. 71-2]. Denmark, and the world itself, is "an unweeded garden That grows to seed. Things rank and gross in nature Possess it merely" [I. ii. 135-37]. Hamlet's role is that of a physician who must lance the ulcerous sore or corruption, by putting Claudius "to his purgation" [III. ii. 306] or speaking "daggers" to his mother in order to cure her soul. He must reveal Claudius to Gertrude for what her husband truly is, "a mildewed ear Blasting his wholesome brother" [III. iv. 64-5]. Without such exposure, Gertrude's complacency "will but skin and film the ulcerous place Whiles rank corruption, mining all within, Infects unseen" [III. iv. 147-49]. The poison that precipitates the action of the play, both a metaphor of disease and an actual evil, must be transformed into a providential weapon ending the lives of Claudius, Gertrude, and Laertes, as well as Hamlet. (pp. 8-10)


Maynard Mack

[In this general analysis of Hamlet, Mack discusses three aspects of the play: its mysteriousness, the relationship between appearance and reality, and a concept the critic terms "mortality." The element of mysteriousness is not only created by the play's various ambiguities and uncertainties, the critic contends, but also by the numerous questions, especially Hamlet's, that pervade the dramatic action. Further, the difficulty in distinguishing appearance from reality poses a crucial dilemma for Hamlet early in the play, Mack asserts, for although the Ghost seems to be a benevolent spirit, it may in fact be a devil who assumes the form of the prince's father. This concern with appearance and reality recurs time and again in Hamlet especially in such issues as Claudius's true nature and the manipulation of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and Ophelia to spy on Hamlet. In addition, the critic continues, the sense of "mortality" in the tragedy is developed in three ways:
through the play's emphasis on human weakness, the instability of human purpose, and humankind's submission to fortune, all of which point to the realization of the inevitability of human mortality. Mack concludes that Hamlet ultimately transcends these obstacles by accepting the world as it is and not as he would like it to be."

My subject is the world of Hamlet. I do not of course mean Denmark, except as Denmark is given a body by the play; and I do not mean Elizabethan England, though this is necessarily close behind the scenes. I mean simply the imaginative environment that the play asks us to enter when we read it or go to see it. (p. 502)

"Of all the tragic worlds that Shakespeare made, [Hamlet's is] easily the most various and brilliant, the most elusive. It is with no thought of doing justice to it that I have singled out three of its attributes for comment. I know too well . . . that no one is likely to accept another man's reading of Hamlet, that anyone who tries to throw light on one part of the play usually throws the rest into deeper shadow, and that what I have to say leaves out many problems—to mention only one, the knotty problem of the text. All I would say in defense of the materials I have chosen is that they seem to me interesting, close to the root of the matter even if we continue to differ about what the root of the matter is, and explanatory, in a modest way, of this play's peculiar hold on everyone's imagination, its almost mythic status, one might say, as a paradigm of the life of man.

The first attribute that impresses us, I think, is mysteriousness. We often hear it said, perhaps with truth, that every great work of art has a mystery at the heart; but the mystery of Hamlet is something else. We feel its presence in the numberless explanations that have been brought forward for Hamlet's delay, his madness, his ghost, his treatment of Polonius, or Ophelia, or his mother; and in the controversies that still go on about whether the play is "undoubtedly a failure" ([T. S.] Eliot's phrase) or one of the greatest artistic triumphs; whether, if it is a triumph, it belongs to the highest order of tragedy; whether, if it is such a tragedy, its hero is to be taken as a man of exquisite moral sensibility ([A. C] Bradley's view) or an egomaniac ([Salvador de Madariaga's view).

Doubtless there have been more of these controversies and explanations than the play requires; for in Hamlet, to paraphrase a remark of Falstaff's, we have a character who is not only mad in himself but a cause that madness is in the rest of us. Still, the very existence of so many theories and countertheories, many of them formulated by sober heads, gives food for thought. Hamlet seems to lie closer to the illogical logic of life than Shakespeare's other tragedies. And while the causes of this situation may be sought by saying that Shakespeare revised the play so often that eventually the motivations were smudged over, or that the original old play has been here or there imperfectly digested, or that the problems of Hamlet lay so close to Shakespeare's heart that he could not quite distance them in the formal terms of art, we have still as critics to deal with effects, not causes. If I may quote . . . from Mr. [E. M. W.] Tillyard, the play's very lack of a rigorous type of causal logic seems to be a part of its point.

Moreover, the matter goes deeper than this. Hamlet's world is preeminently in the interrogative mood. It reverberates with questions, anguished, meditative, alarmed. There are questions that in this play, to an extent I think unparalleled in any other, mark the phases and even the nuances of the action, helping to establish its peculiar baffled tone. There are other questions whose interrogations, innocent at first glance, are subsequently seen to have reached beyond their contexts and to point towards some pervasive inscrutability in Hamlet's world as a whole. Such is that tense series of challenges with which the tragedy begins: Bernardo's of Francisco, "Who's there?" [I. i. 1] Francisco's of Horatio and Marcellus, "Who is there?" [l. 13] Horatio's of the ghost, "What art thou . . . ?" [l. 46]. And then there are the famous questions. In them the interrogations seem to point not only beyond the context but beyond the play, out of Hamlet's predicaments into everyone's: "What a piece of work is a man! . . . And yet to me what is this quintessence of dust?" [II. ii. 303-04, 308]. "To be, or not to be, that is the question" [III. i. 55]. "Get thee to a nunnery. Why wouldst thou be a breeder of sinners?" [III. i. 120-21]. "I am very proud, revengeful, ambitious, with more offences at my beck than I have thoughts to put them in, imagination to give them shape, or time to act them in. What should such fellows as I
do crawling between earth and heaven?" [III. i. 123-28]. "Dost thou think Alexander look'd o' this fashion i' th' earth? . . . And smelt so?" [V. i. 197, 200].

Further, Hamlet's world is a world of riddles. The hero's own language is often riddling, as the critics have pointed out. When he puns, his puns have receding depths in them, like the one which constitutes his first speech: "A little more than kin, and less than kind" [I. ii. 65]. His utterances in madness, even if wild and whirling, are simultaneously, as Polonius discovers, pregnant: "Do you know me, my lord?" "Excellent well. You are a fishmonger" [II. ii. 173-74]. Even the madness itself is riddling: How much is real? How much is feigned? What does it mean? Sane or mad, Hamlet's mind plays restlessly about his world, turning up one riddle upon another. The riddle of character, for example, and how it is that in a man whose virtues else are "pure as grace" [I. iv. 33], some vicious mole of nature, some "dram of eale" [I. iv. 36], can "all the noble substance oft adulter" [I. iv. 37]. Or the riddle of the player's art, and how a man can so project himself into a fiction, a dream of passion, that he can weep for Hecuba. Or the riddle of action: how we may think too little—"What to ourselves in passion we propose," says the player-king, "The passion ending, doth the purpose lose" [III. ii. 194-95]; and again, how we may think too much: "Thus conscience does make cowards of us all, And thus the native hue of resolution Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought" [III. i. 82-5].

There are also more immediate riddles. His mother—how could she "on this fair mountain leave to feed, And batten on this moor?" [III. iv. 66-7]. The ghost—which may be a devil, for "the de'il hath power T' assume a pleasing shape" [II. ii. 599-600]. Ophelia—what does her behavior to him mean? Surprising her in her closet, he falls to such perusal of her face as he would draw it. Even the king at his prayers is a riddle. Will a revenge that takes him in the purging of his soul be vengeance, or hire and salary? As for himself, Hamlet realizes, he is the greatest riddle of all—a mystery, he warns Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, from which he will not have the heart plucked out. He cannot tell why he has of late lost all his mirth, forgone all custom of exercises. Still less can he tell why he delays: "I do not know Why yet I live to say, 'This thing's to do,' Sith I have cause and will and strength and means To do 't" [IV. iv. 43-6].

Thus the mysteriousness of Hamlet's world is of a piece. It is not simply a matter of missing motivations, to be expunged if only we could find the perfect clue. It is built in. It is evidently an important part of what the play wishes to say to us. And it is certainly an element that the play thrusts upon us from the opening word. Everyone, I think, recalls the mysteriousness of that first scene. The cold middle of the night on the castle platform, the muffled sentries, the uneasy atmosphere of apprehension, the challenges leaping out of the dark, the questions that follow the challenges, feeling out the darkness, searching for identities, for relations, for assurance. (pp. 503-06)

Meantime, such is Shakespeare's economy, a second attribute of Hamlet's world has been put before us. This is the problematic nature of reality and the relation of reality to appearance. The play begins with an appearance, an "apparition," to use Marcellus's term—the ghost. And the ghost is somehow real, indeed the vehicle of realities. Through its revelation, the glittering surface of Claudius's court is pierced, and Hamlet comes to know, and we do, that the king is not only hateful to him but the murderer of his father, that his mother is guilty of adultery as well as incest. Yet there is a dilemma in the revelation. For possibly the apparition is an apparition, a devil who has assumed his father's shape.

This dilemma, once established, recurs on every hand. From the court's point of view, there is Hamlet's madness. Polonius investigates and gets some strange advice about his daughter: "Conception is a blessing, but as your daughter may conceive, friend, look to 't" [II. ii. 184-86]. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern investigate and get the strange confidence that "Man delights not me; no, nor woman neither" [II. ii. 309]. Ophelia is "loosed" to Hamlet (Polonius's vulgar word), while Polonius and the king hide behind the arras; and what they hear is a strange indictment of human nature, and a riddling threat: "Those that are married already, all but one, shall live" [III. i. 148-49].
On the other hand, from Hamlet's point of view, there is Ophelia. Kneeling here at her prayers, she seems the image of innocence and devotion. Yet she is of the sex for whom he has already found the name Frailty, and she is also, as he seems either madly or sanely to divine, a decoy in a trick. The famous cry—"Get thee to a nunnery" [III. i. 120]—shows the anguish of his uncertainty. If Ophelia is what she seems, this dirty-minded world of murder, incest, lust, adultery, is no place for her. Were she "as chaste as ice, as pure as snow" [III. i. 135], she could not escape its calumny. And if she is not what she seems, then a nunnery in its other sense of brothel is relevant to her. In the scene that follows he treats her as if she were indeed an inmate of a brothel.

Likewise, from Hamlet's point of view, there is the enigma of the king. If the ghost is only an appearance, then possibly the king's appearance is reality. He must try it further. By means of a second and different kind of "apparition," the play within the play, he does so. But then, immediately after, he stumbles on the king at prayer. This appearance has a relish of salvation in it. If the king dies now, his soul may yet be saved. Yet actually, as we know, the king's efforts to come to terms with heaven have been unavailing; his words fly up, his thoughts remain below. If Hamlet means the conventional revenger's reasons that he gives for sparing Claudius, it was the perfect moment not to spare him—when the sinner was acknowledging his guilt, yet unrepentant. The perfect moment, but it was hidden, like so much else in the play, behind an arras.

There are two arrases in his mother's room. Hamlet thrusts his sword through one of them. Now at last he has got to the heart of the evil, or so he thinks. But now it is the wrong man; now he himself is a murderer. The other arras he stabs through with his words—like daggers, says the queen. He makes her shrink under the contrast he points between her present husband and his father. But as the play now stands (matters are somewhat clearer in the bad Quarto), it is hard to be sure how far the queen grasps the fact that her second husband is the murderer of her first. And it is hard to say what may be signified by her inability to see the ghost, who now for the last time appears. In one sense at least, the ghost is the supreme reality, representative of the hidden ultimate power, in Bradley's terms—witnessing from beyond the grave against this hollow world. Yet the man who is capable of seeing through to this reality, the queen thinks is mad. "To whom do you speak this?" she cries to her son. "Do you see nothing there?" he asks, incredulous. And she replies: "Nothing at all; yet all that is I see" [III. iv. 131-33]. Here certainly we have the imperturbable self-confidence of the worldly world, its layers on layers of habituation, so that when the reality is before its very eyes it cannot detect its presence.

Like mystery, this problem of reality is central to the play and written deep into its idiom. Shakespeare's favorite terms in Hamlet are words of ordinary usage that pose the question of appearances in a fundamental form. "Apparition" I have already mentioned. Another term is "seems." When we say, as Ophelia says of Hamlet leaving her closet, "He seem'd to find his way without his eyes" [II. i. 95], we mean one thing. When we say, as Hamlet says to his mother in the first court-scene, "Seems, Madam! . . . I know not 'seems'" [I. ii. 76], we mean another. And when we say, as Hamlet says to Horatio before the play within the play, "And after, we will both our judgments join In censure of his seeming" [III. ii. 86-7], we mean both at once. The ambiguities of "seem" coil and uncoil throughout this play, and over against them is set the idea of "seeing." So Hamlet challenges the king in his triumphant letter announcing his return to Denmark: "Tomorrow shall I beg leave to see your kingly eyes" [IV. vii. 44-5]. Yet "seeing" itself can be ambiguous, as we recognize from Hamlet's uncertainty about the ghost; or from that statement of his mother's already quoted: "Nothing at all; yet all that is I see."

Another term of like importance is "assume." What we assume may be what we are not: "The de'il hath power T' assume a pleasing shape" [II. ii. 599-600]. But it may be what we are: "If it assume my noble father's person, I'll speak to it" [I. ii. 243-44]. And it may be what we are not yet, but would become; thus Hamlet advises his mother, "Assume a virtue, if you have it not" [III. iv. 160]. The perplexity in the word points to a real perplexity in Hamlet's and our own experience. We assume our habits—and habits are like costumes, as the word implies: "My father in his habit as he liv'd!" [III. iv. 135]. Yet these habits become ourselves in time: "That monster, custom, who all sense doth eat Of habits evil, is angel yet in this, That to the use of actions fair
and good He likewise gives a frock or livery That aptly is put on” [III. iv. 161-65].

Two other terms I wish to instance are "put on" and "shape." The shape of something is the form under which we are accustomed to apprehend it: "Do you see yonder cloud that's almost in shape of a camel?" [III. ii. 376]. But a shape may also be a disguise—even, in Shakespeare's time, an actor's costume or an actor's role. This is the meaning when the king says to Laertes as they lay the plot against Hamlet's life: "Weigh what convenience both of time and means May fit us to our shape" [IV. vii. 149-50]. "Put on" supplies an analogous ambiguity. Shakespeare's mind seems to worry this phrase in the play much as Hamlet's mind worries the problem of acting in a world of surfaces, or the king's mind worries the meaning of Hamlet's transformation. Hamlet has put an antic disposition on, that the king knows. But what does "put on" mean? A mask, or a frock or livery—our "habit"? The king is left guessing, and so are we. (pp. 507-10)

The mysteriousness of Hamlet's world, while it pervades the tragedy, finds its point of greatest dramatic concentration in the first act, and its symbol in the first scene. The problems of appearance and reality also pervade the play as a whole, but come to a climax in Acts II and III, and possibly their best symbol is the play within the play. Our third attribute, though again it is one that crops out everywhere, reaches its full development in Acts IV and V. It is not easy to find an appropriate name for this attribute, but perhaps "mortality" will serve, if we remember to mean by mortality the heartache and the thousand natural shocks that flesh is heir to, not simply death.

The powerful sense of mortality in Hamlet is conveyed to us, I think, in three ways. First, there is the play's emphasis on human weakness, the instability of human purpose, the subjection of humanity to fortune—all that we might call the aspect of failure in man. Hamlet opens this theme in Act I, when he describes how from that single blemish, perhaps not even the victim's fault, a man's whole character may take corruption. Claudius dwells on it again, to an extent that goes far beyond the needs of the occasion, while engaged in seducing Laertes to step behind the arras of a seemer's world and dispose of Hamlet by a trick. Time qualifies everything, Claudius says, including love, including purpose. As for love—it has a "plurisy" in it and dies of its own too much. As for purpose—"That we would do, We should do when we would, for this 'would' changes, And hath abatements and delays as many As there are tongues, are hands, are accidents; And then this 'should' is like a spendthrift's sigh, That hurts by easing" [IV. vii. 118-23]. The player-king, in his long speeches to his queen in the play within the play, sets the matter in a still darker light. She means these protestations of undying love, he knows, but our purposes depend on our memory, and our memory fades fast. Or else, he suggests, we propose something to ourselves in a condition of strong feeling, but then the feeling goes, and with it the resolve. Or else our fortunes change, he adds, and with these our loves: "The great man down, you mark his favorite flies" [III. ii. 204]. The subjection of human aims to fortune is a reiterated theme in Hamlet, as subsequently in Lear. Fortune is the harlot goddess in whose secret parts men like Rosencrantz and Guildenstern live and thrive; the strumpet who threw down Troy and Hecuba and Priam; the outrageous foe whose slings and arrows a man of principle must suffer or seek release in suicide. Horatio suffers them with composure: he is one of the blessed few "Whose blood and judgment are so well co-mingled That they are not a pipe for fortune's finger To sound what stop she please" [III. ii. 69-71]. For Hamlet the task is of a greater difficulty.

Next, and intimately related to this matter of infirmity, is the emphasis on infection—the ulcer, the hidden abscess, "th' imposthume of much wealth and peace That inward breaks and shows no cause without Why the man dies" [IV. iv. 27-9]. Miss [Caroline F. E.] Spurgeon, who was the first to call attention to this aspect of the play [in her Shakespeare's Imagery], has well remarked that so far as Shakespeare's pictorial imagination is concerned, the problem in Hamlet is not a problem of the will and reason, "of a mind too philosophical or a nature temperamentally unfitted to act quickly," nor even a problem of an individual at all. Rather, it is a condition—"a condition for which the individual himself is not responsible, any more than the sick man is to blame for the infection which strikes and devours him, but which, nevertheless, in its course and development, impartially and relentlessly, annihilates him and others, innocent and guilty alike." "That," she adds, "is the
tragedy of Hamlet, as it is perhaps the chief tragic mystery of life." This is a perceptive comment, for it reminds us that Hamlet's situation is mainly not of his own manufacture, as are the situations of Shakespeare's other tragic heroes. He has inherited it; he is "born to set it right." [I. v. 189].

We must not, however, neglect to add to this what another student of Shakespeare's imagery has noticed—that the infection in Denmark is presented alternatively as poison. Here, of course, responsibility is implied, for the poisoner of the play is Claudius. The juice he pours into the ear of the elder Hamlet is a combined poison and disease, a "leperous distilment" that curds "the thin and wholesome blood" [I. v. 70]. From this fatal center, unwholesomeness spreads out till there is something rotten in all Denmark. Hamlet tells us that his "wit's diseased," the queen speaks of her "sick soul," the king is troubled by "the hectic" in his blood, Laertes meditates revenge to warm "the sickness in my heart" [IV. vii. 55], the people of the kingdom grow "muddied. Thick and unwholesome in their thoughts" [IV. v. 81-2]; and even Ophelia's madness is said to be "the poison of deep grief" [IV. v. 75]. In the end, all save Ophelia die of that poison in a literal as well as figurative sense.

But the chief form in which the theme of mortality reaches us, it seems to me, is as a profound consciousness of loss. Hamlet's father expresses something of the kind when he tells Hamlet how his "most seeming-virtuous queen" [I. v. 46], betraying a love which "was of that dignity That it went hand in hand even with the vow I made to her in marriage" [I. v. 48-50], had chosen to "decline Upon a wretch whose natural gifts were poor To those of mine" [II. 50-2]. "O Hamlet, what a falling off was there!" [I. v. 47]. Ophelia expresses it again, on hearing Hamlet's denunciation of love and woman in the nunnery scene, which she takes to be the product of a disordered brain:

O what a noble mind is here o'erthrown!
The courtier's, soldier's, scholar's, eye, tongue, sword:
Th' expectancy and rose of the fair state,
The glass of fashion and the mould of form,
Th' observ'd of all observers, quite, quite down!

[III. i. 150-54]

The passage invites us to remember that we have never actually seen such a Hamlet—that his mother's marriage has brought a falling off in him before we meet him. And then there is that further falling off, if I may call it so, when Ophelia too goes mad—"Divided from herself and her fair judgment, Without the which we are pictures, or mere beasts" [IV. v. 85-6].

Time was, the play keeps reminding us, when Denmark was a different place. That was before Hamlet's mother took off "the rose From the fair forehead of an innocent love" [III. iv. 42-3] and set a blister there. Hamlet then was still "th' expectancy and rose of the fair state" [III. i. 152]; Ophelia, the "rose of May" [IV. v. 158]. For Denmark was a garden then, when his father ruled. There had been something heroic about his father—a king who met the threats to Denmark in open battle, fought with Norway, smote the sledded Polacks on the ice, slew the elder Fortinbras in an honorable trial of strength. There had been something godlike about his father too: "Hyperion's curls, the front of Jove himself, An eye like Mars . . . , A station like the herald Mercury" [III. iv. 56-8]. But, the ghost reveals, a serpent was in the garden, and "the serpent that did sting thy father's life Now wears his crown" [I. v. 39-40]. The martial virtues are put by now. The threats to Denmark are attended to by policy, by agents working deviously for and through an uncle. The moral virtues are put by too. Hyperion's throne is occupied by "a vice of kings" [III. iv. 98], "a king of shreds and patches" [III. iv. 102]; Hyperion's bed, by a satyr, a paddock, a bat, a gib, a bloat king with reechy kisses. The garden is unweeded now, and "grows to seed; things rank and gross in nature Possess it merely" [I. ii. 136-37]. Even in himself he feels the taint, the taint of being his mother's son; and that other taint, from an earlier garden, of which he admonishes Ophelia: "Our virtue cannot so inoculate our old stock but we shall relish of it" [III. i. 116-17]. "Why wouldst thou be a breeder of sinners?" [III. i. 120-21]. "What should such fellows as I do crawling between earth and heaven?" [III. i. 126-27].
"Hamlet is painfully aware," says Professor Tillyard [in his Shakespeare's Problem Plays], "of the baffling human predicament between the angels and the beasts, between the glory of having been made in God's image and the incrimination of being descended from fallen Adam." To this we may add, I think, that Hamlet is more than aware of it; he exemplifies it; and it is for this reason that his problem appeals to us so powerfully as an image of our own.

Hamlet's problem, in its crudest form, is simply the problem of the avenger: he must carry out the injunction of the ghost and kill the king. But this problem, as I ventured to suggest at the outset, is presented in terms of a certain kind of world. The ghost's injunction to act becomes so inextricably bound up for Hamlet with the character of the world in which the action must be taken—its mysteriousness, its baffling appearances, its deep consciousness of infection, frailty, and loss—that he cannot come to terms with either without coming to terms with both.

When we first see him in the play, he is clearly a very young man, sensitive and idealistic, suffering the first shock of growing up. He has taken the garden at face value, we might say, supposing mankind to be only a little lower than the angels. Now in his mother's hasty and incestuous marriage, he discovers evidence of something else, something bestial—though even a beast, he thinks, would have mourned longer. Then comes the revelation of the ghost, bringing a second shock. Not so much because he now knows that his serpent-uncle killed his father; his prophetic soul had almost suspected this. Not entirely, even, because he knows now how far below the angels humanity has fallen in his mother, and how lust—these were the ghost's words—"though to a radiant angel link'd Will sate itself in a celestial bed, And prey on garbage" [I. v. 55-7]. Rather, because he now sees everywhere, but especially in his own nature, the general taint, taking from life its meaning, from woman her integrity, from the will its strength, turning reason into madness. "Why wouldst thou be a breeder of sinners?" "What should such fellows as I do crawling between earth and heaven?" [III. i. 120-21, 126-27]. Hamlet is not the first young man to have felt the heavy and the weary weight of all this unintelligible world; and, like the others, he must come to terms with it.

The ghost's injunction to revenge unfolds a different facet of his problem. The young man growing up is not to be allowed simply to endure a rotten world, he must also act in it. Yet how to begin, among so many enigmatic surfaces? Even Claudius, whom he now knows to be the core of the ulcer, has a plausible exterior. And around Claudius, swathing the evil out of sight, he encounters all those other exteriors, as we have seen. Some of them already deeply infected beneath, like his mother. Some noble, but marked for infection, like Laertes. Some not particularly corrupt but infinitely corruptible, like Rosencrantz and Guildenstern; some mostly weak and foolish like Polonius and Osric. Some, like Ophelia, innocent, yet in their innocence still serving to "skin and film the ulcerous place" [III. iv. 147].

And this is not all. The act required of him, though retributive justice, is one that necessarily involves the doer in the general guilt. Not only because it involves a killing; but because to get at the world of seeming one sometimes has to use its weapons. He himself, before he finishes, has become a player, has put an antic disposition on, has killed a man—the wrong man—has helped drive Ophelia mad, and has sent two friends of his youth to death, mining below their mines, and hoisting the engineer with his own petard. He had never meant to dirty himself with these things, but from the moment of the ghost's challenge to act, this dirtying was inevitable. It is the condition of living at all in such a world. To quote Polonius, who knew that world so well, men become "a little soil'd i' th' working" [II. i. 40]. Here is another matter with which Hamlet has to come to terms.

Human infirmity—all that I have discussed with reference to instability, infection, loss—supplies the problem with its third phase. Hamlet has not only to accept the mystery of man's condition between the angels and the brutes, and not only to act in a perplexing and soiling world. He has also to act within the human limits—"with shabby equipment always deteriorating," if I may adapt some phrases from Eliot's "East Coker," "In the general mess of imprecision of feeling, Undisciplined squads of emotion." Hamlet is aware of that fine
poise of body and mind, feeling and thought, that suits the action to the word, the word to the action; that
acquires and begets a temperance in the very torrent, tempest, and whirlwind of passion; but he cannot at first
achieve it in himself. He vacillates between undisciplined squads of emotion and thinking too precisely on the
event. He learns to his cost how easily action can be lost in "acting," and loses it there for a time himself. But
these again are only the terms of every man's life. As Anatole France reminds us in a now famous apostrophe
to Hamlet: "What one of us thinks without contradiction and acts without incoherence? What one of us is not
mad? What one of us does not say with a mixture of pity, comradeship, admiration, and horror, Goodnight,
sweet Prince!"

In the last act of the play (or so it seems to me, for I know there can be differences on this point), Hamlet
accepts his world and we discover a different man. Shakespeare does not outline for us the process of
acceptance any more than he had done with Romeo or was to do with Othello. But he leads us strongly to
expect an altered Hamlet, and then, in my opinion, provides him. We must recall that at this point Hamlet has
been absent from the stage during several scenes, and that such absences in Shakespearean tragedy usually
warn us to be on the watch for a new phase in the development of the character. . . . Furthermore, and this is
an important matter in the theatre—especially important in a play in which the symbolism of clothing has
figured largely—Hamlet now looks different. He is wearing a different dress—probably, as [Harley] Granville-Barker thinks [in his Preface to "Hamlet"], his "seagown scarf'd" about him, but in any case no
longer the disordered costume of his antic disposition. The effect is not entirely dissimilar to that in Lear,
when the old king wakes out of his madness to find fresh garments on him.

Still more important, Hamlet displays a considerable change of mood. This is not a matter of the way we take
the passage about defying augury, as Mr. Tillyard among others seems to think. It is a matter of Hamlet's
whole deportment, in which I feel we may legitimately see the deportment of a man who has been
"illuminated" in the tragic sense. Bradley's term for it is fatalism, but if this is what we wish to call it, we must
at least acknowledge that it is fatalism of a very distinctive kind—a kind that Shakespeare has been willing to
touch with the associations of the saying in St. Matthew about the fall of a sparrow, and with Hamlet's
recognition that a divinity shapes our ends. The point is not that Hamlet has suddenly become religious; he
has been religious all through the play. The point is that he has now learned, and accepted, the boundaries in
which human action, human judgment, are enclosed.

Till his return from the voyage he had been trying to act beyond these, had been encroaching on the role of
providence, if I may exaggerate to make a vital point. He had been too quick to take the burden of the whole
world and its condition upon his limited and finite self. Faced with a task of sufficient difficulty in its own
right, he had dilated it into a cosmic problem—as indeed every task is, but if we think about this too precisely
we cannot act at all. The whole time is out of joint, he feels, and in his young man's egocentricity, he will set it
right. Hence he misjudges Ophelia, seeing in her only a breeder of sinners. Hence he misjudges himself,
seeing himself a vermin crawling between earth and heaven. Hence he takes it upon himself to be his mother's
conscience, though the ghost has warned that this is no fit task for him, and returns to repeat the warning:
"Leave her to heaven, And to those thorns that in her bosom lodge" [I. v. 86-7]. Even with the king, Hamlet
has sought to play at God. He it must be who decides the issue of Claudius's salvation, saving him for a more
damnable occasion. Now, he has learned that there are limits to the before and after that human reason can
comprehend. Rashness, even, is sometimes good. Through rashness he has saved his life from the commission
for his death, "and prais'd be rashness for it" [V. ii. 7]. This happy circumstance and the unexpected arrival of
the pirate ship make it plain that the roles of life are not entirely self-assigned. "There is a divinity that shapes
our ends, Roughhew them how we will" [V. ii. 10-11]. Hamlet is ready now for what may happen, seeking
neither to foreknow it nor avoid it. "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" [V. ii. 220-22].

The crucial evidence of Hamlet's new frame of mind, as I understand it, is the graveyard scene. Here, in its
ultimate symbol, he confronts, recognizes, and accepts the condition of being man. It is not simply that he
now accepts death, though Shakespeare shows him accepting it in ever more poignant forms: first, in the imagined persons of the politician, the courtier, and the lawyer, who laid their little schemes "to circumvent God" [V. i. 79], as Hamlet puts it, but now lie here; then in Yorick, whom he knew and played with as a child; and then in Ophelia. This last death tears from him a final cry of passion, but the striking contrast between his behavior and Laertes's reveals how deeply he has changed.

Still, it is not the fact of death that invests this scene with its peculiar power. It is instead the haunting mystery of life itself that Hamlet's speeches point to, holding in its inscrutable folds those other mysteries that he has wrestled with so long. These he now knows for what they are, and lays them by. The mystery of evil is present here—for this is after all the universal graveyard, where, as the clown says humorously, he holds up Adam's profession; where the scheming politician, the hollow courtier, the tricky lawyer, the emperor and the clown and the beautiful young maiden, all come together in an emblem of the world; where even, Hamlet murmurs, one might expect to stumble on "Cain's jawbone, that did the first murther" [V. i. 77]. The mystery of reality is here too—for death puts the question, "What is real?" in its irreducible form, and in the end uncovers all appearances: "Is this the fine of his fines and the recovery of his recoveries, to have his fine pate full of fine dirt?" [V. i. 106-07]. "Now get you to my lady's chamber, and tell her, let her paint an inch thick, to this favor she must come" [V. i. 192-94]. Or if we need more evidence of this mystery, there is the anger of Laertes at the lack of ceremonial trappings, and the ambiguous character of Ophelia's own death. "Is she to be buried in Christian burial when she wilfully seeks her own salvation?" [V. i. 1-2] asks the gravedigger. And last of all, but most pervasive of all, there is the mystery of human limitation. The grotesque nature of man's little joys, his big ambitions. The fact that the man who used to bear us on his back is now a skull that smells; that the noble dust of Alexander somewhere plugs a bunghole; that "Imperious Caesar, dead and turn'd to clay, Might stop a hole to keep the wind away" [V. i. 213-14]. Above all, the fact that a pit of clay is "meet" for such a guest as man, as the gravedigger tells us in his song, and yet that, despite all frailties and limitations, "That skull had a tongue in it and could sing once" [V. i. 75].

After the graveyard and what it indicates has come to pass in him, we know that Hamlet is ready for the final contest of mighty opposites. He accepts the world as it is, the world as a duel, in which, whether we know it or not, evil holds the poisoned rapier and the poisoned chalice waits; and in which, if we win at all, it costs not less than everything. I think we understand by the close of Shakespeare's Hamlet why it is that unlike the other tragic heroes he is given a soldier's rites upon the stage. For as William Butler Yeats once said, "Why should we honor those who die on the field of battle? A man may show as reckless a courage in entering into the abyss of himself." (pp. 514-23)


Criticism: Delay in Hamlet

Robert Hapgood

[Hapgood examines the dramaturgy, or the dramatic representation, of "delay" in Hamlet pointing out that while Hamlet is the primary focus of this issue, other characters—most notably Claudius, Laertes, and Fortinbras—often delay or are hindered during the course of events. The critic explores how action begins and ends at various moments in the play in a sequence of events that often culminates in a standstill in which a character experiences a direct contradiction to his or her purposes. Hapgood defines Hamlet's particular form of delay as "inertia " because he experiences difficulty both in getting started and in coming to a stop. For instance, although it takes the prince nearly the whole play to exact his revenge on Claudius, when he finally kills the king he does so first with his sword and second with the poisoned wine. The critic also asserts that the dramaturgy of delay occurs in the play's dialogue. Although Hamlet's soliloquies represent a form of
dramatic action and move the plot forward, ironically the character himself is physically inactive. According to Hapgood, Shakespeare's dramatic representation of delay ultimately "interpenetrates with the theme of death." The catastrophe in the play's finale puts an end to delay, for it resolves the tragedy's three most compelling revenge motives: King Hamlet's murder, Claudius's marriage to Gertrude, and Polonius's murder.

I.
The actions of Hamlet are all beginning and end, with no middle. The play takes place in the shadow of three events—the murder of King Hamlet, the marriage of Claudius and Gertrude, and the death of Polonius. The consequences of these events—the suffering of the wronged, the remorse of the wrongers, the extensive repercussions in subsequent events—are fully and inexorably worked out. Within this atmosphere of prolonged aftermath, numerous actions are begun, stopped, started again, stopped, and not generally brought to completion until the finale. It is these arrested actions which set the main rhythm of the play. Of course, any powerful conflict is likely to involve strong purposes which are somehow frustrated before their decisive fulfillment. What is distinctive about Hamlet is that the purposes are extraordinarily strong, even vowed; the frustrations reach the point of utter deadlock and standstill; and the completions, when they finally come, are sudden, violent, and unexpected.

This is pre-eminently the rhythm of Hamlet's own actions. The central instance comes when he is about to stab Claudius at prayer yet halts his blow. This interrupted gesture, deflected to Polonious, remains suspended in our minds until it is carried through in the finale. The same rhythm is there, in little, when he determines to follow the ghost, is detained by Horatio and Marcellus, and then breaks loose: "Unhand me, gentlemen. / By heaven, I'll make a ghost of him that lets me!" [I. iv. 84-5]. In the large it is there in his progression from high resolution ("the play's the thing" [II. ii. 604]) to relapsing doubts in the "to be or not to be" soliloquy (fifty-five lines later) to the substitute-fulfillment of the play-within-a-play.

But Hamlet is by no means the only character in the play who delays, or is delayed from, accomplishing what he sets out to do. Laertes is often taken as a contrast to Hamlet, the son who moves immediately and directly to the revenge of his father's death; and so he seems when he first storms in to see the king. But his momentum is soon halted, first—physically—by the queen ("Let him go, Gertrude," Claudius twice directs [IV. v. 123, 127]) and then, as Claudius puts it, by the divinity that doth hedge a king. Spent in his own rodomontade [ranting], his rage is soon calmed, and he willingly becomes the king's "organ." Again, his attack on Hamlet in the graveyard is halted and deferred. Fortinbras, the man of military action, is also held back from his purposes. As Claudius' ambassadors report, the Norwegian king

... sends out arrests
  On Fortinbras; which he in brief obeys,
  Receives rebuke from Norway, and in fine
  Makes vow before his uncle never more
  To give th' assay of arms against your majesty.
[II. ii. 67-71]

Does Claudius delay? In Scourge and Minister, G. R. Elliott puts it too strongly when he says, "It is true that Hamlet dies because he postpones too long the killing of the king. But it is equally significant that Claudius dies because he postpones too long the killing of Hamlet." As Elliott admits, Claudius' delay is never given direct comment; nor as the play unfolds is it as clear as it is in hindsight that Claudius must kill Hamlet. Yet Claudius seems to be speaking from experience, as well as influencing Laertes, when he says:

... That we would do
  We should do when we would, for this "would" changes,
  And hath abatements and delays as many
As there are tongues, are hands, are accidents . . .
[IV. vii. 118-21]

And he does make certain slight—but very important—delays. Although he has made up his mind to send Hamlet to England, he follows Polonius' advice to postpone action until after the play and a conference between Hamlet and his mother. Even after he has broken off the play and directed Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to prepare for the voyage, he delays in confining Hamlet, a nearly fatal pause which receives its visual symbol as he kneels attempting to pray during Hamlet's long deliberations. His first plot on Hamlet's life is utterly frustrated, and his final one comes close to it, as Laertes repeatedly fails to score a "hit" in the fencing match. Even the slightest delay for Claudius can be disastrous. It takes only a second's hesitation for it to be "too late" for him to stop Gertrude from drinking the poisoned wine. (pp. 132-34)

Arrested movement is especially striking in the play's many delayed exits. Shakespeare's characters often begin to part and then pause to add an afterthought. But in *Hamlet* the name of action is again and again thus sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought. For a small instance, when Hamlet has broken loose and followed the ghost, Horatio declares, "Have after"; but then pauses to reflect:

. . . To what issue will this come?

**Marcellus.** Something is rotten in the state of Denmark.

**Horatio.** Heaven will direct it.

[I. iv. 89-91]

Only then does Marcellus return to the demands of the situation: "Nay, let's follow him." So the ghost, after scenting the morning air, declares "Brief let me be" [I. v. 59]; yet continues for thirty lines, and lingers after his "adieu, adieu, adieu" [I. v. 91] to cry "swear" again and again from the cellarage. So Laertes bids Ophelia farewell, only to add forty lines of admonition. So while Laertes' servants tend and the wind sits in the shoulder of his sail, Polonius chooses to deliver his few precepts and multiple blessings. So, after he says farewell to Reynaldo, Polonius amusingly keeps adding further directions. So, after Ophelia tells him of Hamlet's visit to her, Polonius immediately determines: "Come, go with me. I will go seek the king" [II. i. 98]; yet it takes twenty lines and two more repetitions of "Come" before they do so.

Claudius is a study in haste and pause. At first he is full of dispatch, sending off the ambassadors to Norway with "Farewell, and let your haste commend your duty" [I. ii. 39]. He seems less assured but still fully in control in his "hasty sending" for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and in his "quick determination" to send Hamlet "with speed to England" [III. i. 168-69]. Yet his resolution can be brought up short by his conscience. When he and Polonius are about to withdraw to spy on Hamlet, they pause to reflect in turn on their guilts, until Polonius breaks in with "I hear him coming" [III. i. 54]. And of course the king's abrupt exit after the mousetrap is followed by his main moment of pause as he tries to pray. This is not only a delay in his plot against Hamlet; it also represents a moment of deadlock in his inner life. As he says:

Pray can I not,
Though inclination be as sharp as will.
My stronger guilt defeats my strong intent,
And like a man to double business bound
I stand in pause where I shall first begin,
And both neglect.
[III. iii. 38-43]

After Polonius' death, there is something truly hectic about Claudius' haste in sending Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to catch Hamlet, while delaying their departure three times with afterthoughts. At this same point, he repeatedly tells Gertrude to "Come"—each time interrupting their exit, however, by his further
reflections. And while he knows that he should pretend "to bear all smooth and even, / This sudden sending
him away must seem / Deliberate pause" [IV. iii. 7-9], he plainly cannot wait for the party bound for England
to be off with "fiery quickness." After that, he is all calm and patience, even after Hamlet returns. He is
masterful in restraining Laertes, persuading him to "keep close within your chamber" [IV. vii. 129] and
controlling his outburst at Ophelia's grave. The funeral scene closes with the most sinisterly dynamic pause in
the play; Claudius promises Laertes:

This grave shall have a living monument.
An hour of quiet shortly shall we see;
Till then in patience our proceeding be. [V. i. 297-99]

Hamlet makes many delayed exits. While others leave, he often remains on stage at the end of a scene, for a
full soliloquy or a brief comment. After the ghost episode, he shakes hands and parts from Horatio and
Marcellus to "go pray," only to return to swear them repeatedly to secrecy. He ends the scene
characteristically, starting off ("Let us go in together" [I. v. 186]), but pausing for

And still your fingers on your lips, I pray.
The time is out of joint. O cursed spite
That ever I was born to set it right!
[I. v. 187-89]

before concluding: "Nay, come, let's go together." In the "get thee to a nunnery" episode [III. i. 87ff.], he
again and again tells Ophelia "farewell." . . . In the bedroom scene, Hamlet over and over bids his mother
"goodnight." His most notable "delayed exit" comes at his death, marked as it is by his "I am dead, Horatio . . .
. Horatio, I am dead . . . I die, Horatio! . . . the rest is silence" [V. ii. 332-58].

There is an inertia about Hamlet. He has difficulty both in getting under way and in coming to a stop. He puts
off killing Claudius but then kills him twice. Both kinds of inertia are involved in his penchant for dallying
speculatively on the verge of important events. . . . In the last act, this is intensified. For then, when every
moment before the ambassadors arrive should count, Hamlet is delighted to spend his "interim" matching wits
with a gravedigger and havings some fun with a fop. Because of his new-found willingness to "let be," these
moments of prolonged distraction from his task do not seem as outrageously frivolous as they otherwise
would. Yet neither Hamlet's graveyard musings nor his toyings with Osric are as fascinating as his reflections
on the dram of eal or his theory of drama; and I suspect that we are meant, toward the end of this long play, to
grow weary of Hamlet's dallyings and wish that he would get on with it.

At long last, of course, he does so; but, like the other dominant characters, in an unexpected and sudden way.
His great opportunity comes about not through is own planning but through Claudius' machinations and the
accidents of the moment. At the last minute, he regains the initiative he lost in the prayer scene and ends his
prolonged conflict with Claudius in reckless haste. Oddly, much the same can be said of his conflict with
himself. For his unhesitating decision to enter a fencing match with the man whose father he has killed,
sponsored by the man who has killed his father and ordered his own death, comes close to the self-slaughter
he earlier longed for but gave pause to.

Claudius succeeds in killing Hamlet by proxy, as planned, but in a fashion which proves suddenly to be
self-incriminating and self-destructive. Laertes, though it is almost against his conscience, completes his
interrupted attack on Hamlet; yet its outcome is not, finally, the satisfaction of revenge but an exchange of
forgiveness. Curiously, Laertes' earlier threat to Claudius gets carried through in his cry, "The king, the king's
to blame" [V. ii. 320]. Fortiribras' frustrated drive toward conquest is more than fulfilled, without battle, when
at the end he walks into the whole kingdom of Denmark.
Thus in some sixty lines, the play's main actions reach abrupt completion. Only among themselves do the strongest characters (Hamlet, Claudius, Laertes, Fortinbras) work out the whole cadence from resolution through frustration and standstill to odd fulfillment. Hamlet's conflict with his mother suggests certain phases of this pattern. On the way to her bedroom, he checks his impulse to use daggers, resolving to speak them instead. (Even so, however, Gertrude thinks that he intends to murder her and calls for help.) But her death when it comes, though sudden and unexpected, is her husband's doing, not her son's. Polonius and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern all die in bizarre ways and in an atmosphere of haste, no shriving time allowed; yet their preceding conflicts with Hamlet were no more than a series of verbal skirmishes, in which Hamlet successfully frustrated their attempts to pluck out the heart of his mystery. Amid all these sudden deaths, Ophelia's is notable gradual; indeed, in no way does her career follow the main rhythm of arrested action.

II.

The same kind of overarching irony that applies to the action applies to the dialogue. In the same sense that Hamlet—for all that happens in it—is about not acting, Hamlet—for all its more than 3700 lines—is also about not talking. Like Laertes, many of the characters have in them a "speech of fire" [IV. vii. 190]. Yet at first they cannot, will not, or dare not communicate it. Sometimes they are literally silent; sometimes they say everything but what they really have to say; sometimes they lie; sometimes they speak darkly, or to the wrong person, or to someone who chooses not to listen. With some, this speech of fire remains uncommunicated. With others, especially Hamlet, it finally blazes forth in an outburst all the more intense, and often extended, for its previous frustration. Of course, not all of the impulses to speak in the play are arrested. Far from it. No one in literature is quicker of tongue than Hamlet himself, and many of the other characters are notably articulate, in fact, loquacious. Only the most important things are held back.

Every step in transmitting the truth about King Hamlet's death is marked by delay. The ghost must appear twice to the guards, silent himself and distilling them to speechless fear, before they go to Horatio, whose ears are fortified against their story. Again, the ghost is dumb (and dumbfounding to Horatio, who has to be urged to speak) but seemingly about to speak when the cock crows. When it appears to Hamlet, speech is again arrested on both sides. Hamlet vows to speak to the ghost "though hell itself should gape / And bid me hold my peace" [I. ii. 244-45]. . . . Still the ghost does not speak until Hamlet declares: "Speak. I'll go no further" [I. v. 1].

The ghost is forbid to tell the secrets of its prison house, and thus holds back the eternal blazon "whose lightest word / Would harrow up thy soul, freeze thy young blood, / Make thy two eyes like stars start from their spheres" [I. v. 15-17]. But the tale it does tell is almost as harrowing. For fifty lines after learning the name of the murderer, Hamlet says nothing. Not until after the ghost's exit does he break his silence with an extended and extravagant protestation that his father's "commandment all alone shall live / Within the book and volume of my brain" [I. v. 102-03]. Yet communication of the ghost's message to Hamlet is still not complete. The ghost was well advised to insist that Hamlet "lend thy serious hearing" and "List, list, O, list!" [I. v. 5, 22]. For he does not finally take the ghost's word until he has grounds more relative.

The central instance of arrested speech is that of Hamlet toward Claudius. At his first appearance, after his enigmatic "I am too much in the sun" [I. ii. 67], Hamlet has nothing whatever to say to his uncle; every subsequent speech in this scene is pointedly addressed to his mother. In his first soliloquy, he expresses to himself his contempt for Claudius, calling him a satyr, "no more like my father / Than I to Hercules" [I. ii. 152-53]. After the ghost reveals that Claudius is a murderer, Hamlet denounces to himself and his tables that "smiling, damned villain!" [I.v. 106] and seems on the verge of telling Horatio and Marcellus his "news" immediately. It may be that he is about to say it when he begins "There's never a villain dwelling in all Denmark," only then to catch himself short and add, "But he's an arrant knave" [I. v. 123-24]. (pp. 135-40)

Claudius meanwhile has built a court of concealment and lies, founded on the forged process of King Hamlet's death. "Give thy thoughts no tongue" [I. iii. 59], Polonius advises Laertes, and perfectly hits off the
atmosphere at Elsinore. There is a progression in falsity, as the king's secret contaminates his own life and that of his court. At first, the one key lie having already been told, it is a matter of tacit concealment and smiling hypocrisy. As Hamlet takes malicious delight in demonstrating, Claudius has surrounded himself with yes-men. Then in his service his subjects (even Ophelia) begin to engage in small deceptions. His own out-and-out lies do not come until late in the play, when he deceives Laertes about Hamlet's guilt, misleads Gertrude about calming Laertes' rage, and at the end, with truly extraordinary presence of mind, declares that Gertrude merely "sounds to see them bleed" [V. ii. 308] and—his last words—"I am but hurt" [V. ii. 324]. Although he suffers keenly from the gap between his deed and his most painted word, his cry for "light" is as far as he ever goes toward the kind of public confession of his guilt which, with its consequences, would allow him to pray for forgiveness. For all his easy public address, Claudius in the speech which most concerns him remains in effect mute:

My words fly up. My thoughts remain below.
Words without thoughts never to heaven go.
[III. iii. 97-8]

Hamlet's one-line denunciation of dying Claudius is necessarily brief, but it is for that reason all the more powerful. In contrast to his earlier, private mouth-curse ("Bloody, bawdy villain! / Remorseless, treacherous, lecherous, landless villain!" [II. ii. 580-81]), his final, public one is tersely comprehensive: "thou incestuous, murd'rous, damned Dane" [V. ii. 325]. Each word adds a further area of villainy: familial, social, religious, and political. Though still sibilant and assonant, these sound effects are no longer excessive, and the dentals at the end add bite.

Unlike Amleth in the legend, Hamlet is not allowed to deliver a final, explanatory public oration. To the end, his communication of what he most wants to say is arrested:

You that look pale and tremble at this chance,
That are but mutes or audience to this act,
Had I but time—as this fell sergeant, Death,
Is strict in his arrest—O, I could tell you . . .
[V. ii. 334-37]

And it is left to Horatio to report him and his cause aright. It is fully in the rhythm of arrested speech that Horatio's own report to the yet unknowing world should be promised and adumbrated but deferred.

III.

For too long, too much critical attention was given to Hamlet's delay and its causes. One of the healthiest tendencies of recent Hamlet criticism has been a widening of interest from Hamlet to the whole work, from Hamlet's delay to other important themes. Along with this, however, has come a tendency to minimize the importance of delay. . . . For the rhythms of arrested action and speech interwork endlessly with other major elements: the play's images of hidden disease jibe with the prevailing sense of fatally suppressed deeds and words; its revelations of evil petrify not only Hamlet but Claudius and Laertes; its constant questionings result from the atmosphere of secrecy created by arrested speech. Above all, the dramaturgy of delay interpenetrates with the theme of death. Hamlet is acutely aware both of the fixity and the silence of death: dead Polonius will "stay" for the guards and that prating knave "Is now most still, most secret, and most grave" [III. iv. 214]; Yorick's smile is fixed on his grinning skull and his gibes will no longer set the table on a roar. It is at the end, where that fell sergeant is most strict in his arrest, that death is most in the rhythm of the play, ending at last the reverberations of the three original sins (the murder of King Hamlet, the marriage, and the killing of Polonius) and fulfilling, in ironically mutual destruction, the vows of Hamlet, Claudius, and Laertes which followed in their wake.
The rhythms of delay also re-enforce one another. The moments of silence and inaction tend to be one, and
the same loquaciousness that postpones what really needs saying, postpones what really needs doing. There is
a sense in which everything Hamlet says and does is a substitute for the delayed act of killing the king. Above
all, the dramaturgy of delay contributes to our sense of a world in which direct action and speech are
extremely difficult, almost impossible. Actions are not to be carried through without the utmost persistence,
the most desperate measures, and the most extraordinary luck—and even then they may well miscarry.
Communication is at best minimal and dubious. For Hamlet lives in a world of "bad dreams." The battlements
of Elsinore are haunted, its corridors are dark and circuitous, its rooms prisonlike, its halls filled with elaborately disguised figures. Its inhabitants are subject to attacks of paralysis at crucial moments, followed
by fits of wild activity and speech. In this nightmare world, Hamlet's difficulties in acting and speaking are
nothing unusual. He delays because he suffers in their most acute form from maladies endemic in human life
as it is lived in Elsinore.

It is true that Hamlet has his distinctive susceptibilities to this prevailing condition, one of which is his own
awareness of it. But that is another essay—and of a different sort from this one, where I have resisted making
still another analysis of Hamlet's delay in itself in order to study the virtually unnoticed instances of delay in
other characters and in other aspects of Shakespeare's dramaturgy. (pp. 142-44)

Source: Robert Hapgood, "Hamlet Nearly Absurd: The Dramaturgy of Delay," in The Tulane Drama Review,

Robert R. Reed, Jr.

[Reed analyzes not only Hamlet's internal meditations on his hesitation to exact revenge on Claudius, but also
various external obstacles which prevent him from killing the king. According to the critic, Hamlet's
misgivings about the Ghost are perhaps the chief impediment to his taking revenge, noting that the prince
almost immediately questions its identity and motives. Hamlet is therefore reluctant to act upon its demands.
Furthermore, once Claudius's guilt is established, Hamlet refrains from killing him at prayer because the king
is in an act of repentance and his soul might go to heaven. Because such external obstacles hinder Hamlet
from taking his revenge, Reed asserts, he vents his frustration in furious self-reproaches throughout the play.
The critic provides a psychoanalytic analysis of Hamlet's self-castigation, deducing that the prince relies on
self-incrimination to soothe his irrational mood swings. Unconsciously, Hamlet's mind becomes so irrational
due to its inability to evaluate these external obstacles that it magnifies his frustration by imposing
unreasonable guilt on his consciousness.]

In view of the countless "solutions" to the paradox of Hamlet's conduct, the reader may understandably
suspect me of crass boldness in adding a further comment. I take heart, however, from my conviction that
even the most thoughtful of recent criticisms have not departed completely from the nineteenth-century
tradition which condones expedient evasions of one or more of the major facts. My purpose is to correlate
these facts into an intelligible pattern of conduct. Neither the external problems that render close to impossible
Hamlet's execution of vengeance upon Claudius nor the prince's bitter self-accusations blaming the delay
wholly upon himself need be side-stepped or minimized; but the evasion or, at best, the distortion of one or
the other has traditionally been the custom of the critics, since from the viewpoint of logic the two phenomena
are strikingly incompatible. Dr. Ernest Jones, employing a tenet of modern psychoanalysis, goes so far as to
argue that Hamlet procrastinates because of an Oedipus complex. Indeed, from the time of [Johann Wolfgang
von] Goethe, the majority of critics have ascribed Hamlet's delay in avenging his murdered father to a
weakness of character. But those more familiar with Elizabethan traditions have insisted that the delay is
motivated by manifest external obstacles; they have stressed two main difficulties: Hamlet's orthodox doubt as
to the veracity of the Ghost and, second, the complications of executing vengeance upon a heavily guarded
monarch, against whom there is no tangible evidence of his crime. With the latter critics I concur in full,
except for one thing— their custom of side-stepping or, at best, awkwardly explaining Hamlet's
self-accusations of delay. The psychotic factors, I agree, are in no way responsible for Hamlet's delay in avenging his father; on the contrary, a not uncommon neurosis results from Hamlet's enforced inactivity and is the cause of his self-recriminations, which, in view of the external obstacles to vengeance, are clearly unwarranted. Yet, as I shall hope to prove, they are perfectly intelligible—in fact, so intelligible that Hamlet's conduct would appear obtuse and unnatural without them.

The two traditional schools of thought concerning the character of Hamlet are both unsound for the reason that each bases its interpretation on only a part of the important facts. The school that adheres to the principle that Hamlet's delay is internally motivated may be divided into three groups: the critics led by Goethe with his theory that Hamlet is weak-willed; those led by [August Wihelm von] Schlegel and [Samuel Taylor] Coleridge, who maintained that the habit of meditation paralyzes the capacity for action; and those who have followed Hermann Ulrici's doctrine that Christian ethics, or moral scruples, are a deterrent to blood revenge. Whatever their basic differences of opinion, these critics have pursued a similar method of argument: they have ignored or minimized the external obstacles to vengeance and, citing those passages in which Hamlet upbraids himself for procrastinating, have concluded that the prince is by nature incapable of executing a ruthless deed. The opposing critics, following the lead of the Germans J. L. Klein and Karl Werder, have correctly pointed out the external obstacles to Hamlet's motive of revenge, but are embarrassed by his self-accusations of delay, and—Werder in part excepted—explain them oddly or ignore them. A third, more modern group, including Ernest Jones and Oscar J. Campbell, has attempted to compromise these viewpoints; these men recognize Hamlet as a youth capable of decisive action, but ascribe his failure in the particular motive of revenge to psychotic shortcomings. Professor Campbell's theory [see excerpt in section on Melancholy] has aroused the fewest objections. He regards Hamlet as a manic-depressive, who vacillates between violent action and brooding inaction: "Adverse fate so times the rhythm of Hamlet's malady that at any given moment he is in the grip of the emotions which fit him least to deal with the situation confronting him." One objection to Campbell's theory is that, in explaining Hamlet's failure to act at the proper moment, it depends too strongly on coincidence—as Campbell suggests, on "adverse fate". More important, although it recognizes that Hamlet is at times a man of action, it fails to consider in full the external obstacles confronting the motive of vengeance, a consideration which a complete account of the facts cannot evade.

Ernest Jones's argument that Hamlet suffers an Oedipus complex is the most ingenious attempt to solve the Hamlet problem [see excerpt in section on Hamlet's character]. Like the arguments of his predecessors who have insisted that Hamlet's delay in exacting vengeance is internally motivated, it adequately explains those speeches, three in number, in which the prince reproaches himself for procrastination; but it also recognizes Hamlet as a man of action—a fact that the adherents of the "paralysis of doubt" theory have been obliged to overlook—and concludes that only in the matter of revenge is the prince incapable of action. This is explained by the fact that Hamlet, having inadequately repressed a desire to possess his mother, identifies himself with his intended victim, now espoused to his mother, and thus cannot, in clear conscience, bring himself to act against him. To accept the principle that an Oedipus complex deters Hamlet in his motive, we are asked to give credence to two hypotheses: first, that Shakespeare (who knew nothing of Freudian psychology) suffered from a marked Oedipus complex and, thus, depicted Hamlet in his own likeness as powerless to act against a man who had done away with his father and married his mother; second, that Hamlet's delay in the motive of vengeance cannot be adequately explained by external obstacles. The first hypothesis neither can nor need be refuted; Dr. Jones has convinced himself and a sizable minority of his readers that Shakespeare was the victim of an Oedipus complex in spite of the fact that Jones and his professional confreres [colleagues] are the first to emphasize the months of laborious probing and examination essential to the psychoanalysis of a patient. Shakespeare's "Oedipus complex" must, I think, remain a dubious hypothesis from now until Doomsday. The second hypothesis is simply a contradiction of the truth. Along with other critics, John Ashworth (Atlantic Monthly, April 1949) has emphatically pointed out that we cannot expect an avenger to strike down his royal victim in full sight of a gathering of courtiers and bodyguards, by whom he is customarily attended. Such actions may result from desperation or mania, but not from calculated vengeance. Jones argues that the prince has an excellent opportunity to kill his uncle at the close of the play-within-the-play and points to only one
reason for his failure to do so: namely, his so-called "Oedipus complex". But, one unavoidably asks, what would have been the outcome of such a public attempt at vengeance? Whether he succeeded or failed, Hamlet would almost assuredly have lost his own life. Even more distressing to a man of cherished honor, he—and not Claudius—would have been recorded by history as the blackguard; the reason for this is evident, even to the blind: of the large and influential assemblage of persons who are present, only Hamlet and indirectly Horatio have knowledge that Claudius is a murderer. To the others, the King's implied confession of guilt is meaningless. One marvels at the assumption—made by so intelligent a man as Dr. Jones—that the testimony of a ghost, delivered in absentia, is sufficient evidence to convict a king of fratricide.

Moreover, unlike many of my predecessors, some of them clearly ignorant of Elizabethan traditions, I cannot dismiss Hamlet's expressed doubts as to the veracity of the Ghost as mere talk and babble. The Protestant and consequently the Elizabethan belief, in contrast to the Roman Catholic creed, was that the souls of the dead went directly to Heaven or Hell, not to Purgatory, and could not return to this world. The Swiss Protestant Ludwig Lavater in De Spectris (1570) and King James I in Daemonologie (1597) upheld this viewpoint, maintaining that the Devil could assume either the shape or the dead body of a newly deceased person and thus give the illusion of a ghost; but the reality of ghosts was positively denied by both men. James argued that an intelligent Christian knows that "neither can the spirite of the defunct return to his friend, or yet an Angel use such formes." Lavater . . . wrote: "Evil spirits do use this kind of deceit, to fayne themselves to be soules of such as are deceased." This attitude, both Protestant and Elizabethan, is expressed not only by Horatio and Marcellus but also by Hamlet as they gaze upon the apparition of the dead king. Horatio fears that it "may assume some other horrible form" [I. iv. 72]; Marcellus, like Horatio, begs Hamlet not to follow it; and Hamlet supposes that it may be "a goblin damned" [I. iv. 40]. Nevertheless, he is undecided because of its "questionable shape" and consequently agrees to "call [it] Hamlet, / King, father" [I. iv. 44-5]. When alone with the Ghost, Hamlet has neither the will nor the rational power nor the courage to doubt its authenticity; for the moment, "the pales and forts of reason" [I. iv. 28] are inundated completely under emotional predilection. Later, in a mood governed by reason rather than emotion, Hamlet expresses serious doubt concerning the authenticity of the Ghost: "The spirit that I have seen / May be the devil [who] . . . / Abuses me to damn me" [II. ii. 598-603]. It seems odd, of course, that he should not announce this renewed doubt as to the Ghost until after he has arranged with the itinerant actors the play-within-the-play, the intent of which is to elicit some sort of confession from Claudius and thus prove, or disprove, the reliability of the Ghost. But only one day after this doubt is expressed, Hamlet makes it apparent that he had discussed his misgivings about the Ghost with Horatio at a time precedent to the Players' coming to Elsinore; careful to inform his friend that a play will shortly be staged "before the king", he explains:

One scene of it comes near the circumstance
Which I have told thee of my father's death . . .
If his [Claudius'] occulted guilt
Do not itself unkennel in one speech,
It is a damned ghost that we have seen,
And my imaginations are as foul
As Vulcan's stithy [forge].
[III. ii. 76-84]

How long Hamlet has entertained a renewed doubt concerning the Ghost's identity, we are not told by the text of the play. It is, however, logical to believe that as soon as the emotional stimuli of coming face to face with the Ghost had worn off, the Protestant attitude, which denied the reality of ghosts, began to re-assert itself in Hamlet's mind. There can, furthermore, be little doubt that Hamlet's misgivings about the veracity of the Ghost are honest ones and not a "cogent" excuse, as Jones has insisted, for his failure to carry out promptly his motive of vengeance. Upon the very first opportunity of determining whether his informant is an honest ghost or a deceitful devil intent on his damnation, Hamlet acts with remarkable despatch and precision: only a single day elapses between his meeting with the Players and the performance of the play-scene; moreover, the
speech which he has prepared to be inserted in the "Murder of Gonzago" is so deadly in its pointedness that the first six of its "dozen or sixteen" lines [II. ii. 541] are sufficient to bring a tacit confession from Claudius. Thus, having fashioned an unexpected opportunity to his own purposes, Hamlet removes the paramount obstacle to his motive of vengeance, and consequently his most cogent reason not to slay Claudius, without an iota of evasion.

Once the uncertainty about the Ghost's identity has been removed—once Claudius, witnessing the satanic murder featured in the play-within-the-play, has cried, "Give me some light: away!" [III. ii. 269]—Hamlet finds the King alone at prayers. Again, we must not forget the viewpoint of the Elizabethan; to him, repentance of past sins, however heinous, was tantamount to the soul's salvation. To do away with Claudius while he is in the act of repentance would have been, as Hamlet says, mere "hire and salary, not revenge" [III. iii. 79]. His father had been slain, to quote the Ghost, "with all my imperfections on my head: O horrible! O horrible! most horrible!" [I. v. 79-80] In Fletcher's The Pilgrim, revenge is put aside for the reason that the intended victim, a man who prays hourly, is too well prepared for Heaven. To the extent that the Elizabethan accepted the fact that King Hamlet (slain without benefit of repentance) was "confin'd to fast in fires" [I. v. 11], he was bound to understand that the prince could not slay Claudius "in the purging of his soul" [III. iii. 85] without, in all likelihood, securing the salvation of his victim.

It is manifest, I think, that Hamlet was thwarted in the motive of vengeance by external obstacles. But the critics who have promulgated this theory have, with unfailing regularity, weakly interpreted or side-stepped his self-accusations of delay, the very passages on which the opposing school has built its thesis that the delay was internally motivated. In consequence, even the best criticisms of Hamlet's conduct have been unduly one-sided. Before I turn to an explanation of Hamlet's "admissions" of delay—his pseudo-procrastination—I wish to add one thought in support of the evidence that Hamlet's obstacles were external. In the saga of Amleth, as recorded by Saxo Grammaticus, the hero awaits, as he informs his mother, the "fitting hour" to avenge his slain father against Feng. This principle of the avenger's biding his time, of awaiting the appropriate opportunity, was later to be the almost invariable technique of Elizabethan tragedy. Hamlet as an avenger was the product of this and no other tradition. He is confronted by the normal number of external problems; what distinguishes him from his fellow avengers of the stage is his hypersensitive response to the delay imposed by these obstacles.

We come now to the apparent paradox of Hamlet's self-accusations of delay, which are clearly unwarranted. This paradox can in part be clarified by Elizabethan tenets that explain the functions of conscience and especially its morbid preoccupation with past sins and omissions. But, in so far as Shakespeare's insight into character went far beyond the scope of Elizabethan psychology, a more complete explanation of Hamlet's conduct must depend upon a modernization of these concepts. In the respect that the present-day concepts which best explain Hamlet's paradoxical conduct are basically identical to the Elizabethan tenets available to Shakespeare, they have a validity that is not shared by the Oedipus complex theory.

Tenets of Elizabethan psychology fully support the hypothesis that Hamlet's unwarranted self-reproaches are the outgrowth of a conscience that is preoccupied with some past sin or omission; but they do not contain an adequate explanation of the psychic origins of his guilt complex, a task that must depend on the help of those modern principles which explain the relation of the superego, or the conscience, to abnormal behavior. The Elizabethan physician Timothy Bright in his once-famous Treatise of Melancholie (1586) recognized "a molestation [that] riseth from conscience, condemning the guilty soul of those ingraven laws of nature, which no man is voide of. . . . Neither is the guiltiness brought to us by foreine report, but the knowledge riseth from the conscience of the offender." Thirty-five years later, Robert Burton, restating the established Elizabethan causes of melancholy [in his The Anatomy of Melancholy], wrote: "The last and greatest cause of this malady is our conscience. . . . Our conscience . . . grinds our souls with remembrance of some precedent sins, makes us reflect upon, accuse and condemn our own selves. . . . This scrupulous conscience . . . tortures so many, [who] . . . accuse themselves and aggravate every small offence." In fine, Bright and Burton have told us that
a disquieting sense of guilt arises from the dictates of conscience when they are violated; second, that victims of conscience deal in self-accusations and, as Burton states, "out of a deep apprehension of their unworthiness . . . aggravate" every trivial sin or personal failure. That Shakespeare was keenly aware of the distempers that a violated conscience could evoke is frequently evident in his plays; Richard III, after the dream in which the ghosts of his victims appear, cries:

O coward conscience, how dost thou afflict me! . . .
My conscience hath a thousand several tongues,
And every tongue brings in a several tale,
And every tale condemns me for a villain.
[Richard III, V. iii. 179, 193-95]

The principles of Bright and Burton provide us with a broad formula outlining Hamlet's abnormal tendency to abase himself. His over-developed conscience is violated by something that he has done or, equally possible, by something that he has failed to do, which is—as is clear from the context of the play—his failure to avenge his father; in consequence, informed by his conscience of his "guiltiness", he falls into excessive and, in his case, unwarranted self-accusations.

A second important aspect that I believe underlies Hamlet's conduct is hinted at, but not clarified, by Elizabethan mental science. To counteract melancholy imposed by conscience, Burton advised "repentance", which he termed "a remedy . . . of our miseries." Burton meant "repentance to God"; but this does not preclude the probability that Shakespeare considered self-rebuke, certainly a major aspect of repentance, to be a potent means of inactivating the "molestation" which, as Bright maintained, "riseth from conscience". (pp. 177-82)

Two facts are clear: for external reasons Hamlet is unable to carry out his motive of vengeance; on the other hand, he violently upbraids himself for not doing so. So far, in relying on Elizabethan principles of conscience, I have made only a tenuous explanation of this enigma. The psychic origin and the ultimate structure of the dictate that tyrannizes over Hamlet's mind are not yet clear, nor has it been adequately shown why a conscience-stricken person has need to resort to self-accusation. Freud has argued that the superego, or conscience, takes its beginning from a threat of castration essential to suppress the infantile Oedipus complex. But this hypothesis, right or wrong, is hardly material to the actual existence of the superego, which, as psychoanalysts and many psychologists agree, is comprised of dictates acquired through moral discipline in childhood and, remaining thereafter "wholly or very largely unconscious" [Edmund S. Conklin, in his Principles of Abnormal Psychology], has the duty of censorship over the conscious mind. Freud points out that the earliest and strongest of these dictates evolve from the child's relation with his parents, both from self-identification with them and their ideals and from their precepts; he also recognizes that a principal dictate acquired in childhood is that of filial obedience, which is expressed in a high regard by the child for his parents and without which the inculcation of further discipline would be all but impossible. Furthermore, the stronger has been a child's moral discipline, the more tyrannical, according to Freud, tend to be the dictates of the superego, which, in his interpretation, "the ego [consciousness] forms . . . out of the id" [The Ego and the Id]. That Hamlet, a prince and only child, has been subjected to the strictest kind of discipline, especially in regard for his parents, is not merely a logical hypothesis; it is a truth manifest throughout the play. His filial obedience is hinted at in his attitude toward his mother at the outset: "I shall in all my best obey you, madam" [I. ii. 120]. But far stronger are Hamlet's devotion and feeling of duty toward his dead father. This attitude, even before the Ghost has appeared to him, underscores his first soliloquy: "So excellent a king; that was, to this, / Hyperion to a satyr" [I. ii. 139-40]. When seconds later—having severely censured the queen's hasty remarriage—he sobs, "But break, my heart, for I must hold my tongue" [I. ii. 159], he is not stifling a jealousy for his mother and her "incestuous sheets", as the adherents of the Oedipus complex theory have insisted. On the contrary, so strong has been his moral training, so strong at present are the dictates of his offended conscience, that he is horrified at her infidelity to his father; his despair is made complete, and he is stunned
into silence, by the knowledge that his words and actions are powerless to atone for his mother's immense sacrilege, which, as he describes it, "cannot come to good" [I. ii. 158]. His accustomed esteem for his mother—and with it much of his moral outlook on life—has crashed about him, in irreparable fragments.

Shortly, Hamlet learns from the Ghost that his paramount responsibility is to avenge his father's murder. In a passion of filial obedience, he vows to "sweep to . . . revenge" on "wings as swift as meditation" [I. v. 30]; later, just after the Ghost has departed, he pledges: "Thy commandment all alone shall live / Within the book and volume of my brain" [I. v. 102-03]. Once his conscious mind has reasserted itself, Hamlet is fully aware that he is confronted by hazardous external obstacles, and hence plans to put on "an antic disposition" [I. v. 172] in order to conceal his motive. But his conscience, the "precipitate" of childhood years of strictest moral discipline, is not able to take account of such practical matters. Since it had been activated, while his reason was largely suppressed, during the encounter with the Ghost—a matter confirmed by his unqualified expressions of filial duty at that time—it has dedicated itself to an immediate course of vengeance which, although consistent with Hamlet's deep sense of loyalty, is independent of the commitments later resolved upon by his rational mind. That part of it, moreover, which is unconscious . . . is completely isolated from the faculty of reason and has not the power even to comprehend Hamlet's rationally developed doubt as to the veracity of the Ghost. Hamlet's self is divided by two injunctions, one resulting from the precautions of reason, the other from the unconscious and insistent dictates of the superego. Consider, for example, the soliloquy ending Act II: it is sharply contradictory in substance for the reason that Hamlet's mind is at first engaged in response to the dictates of his conscience. This response, confirming the superego's unqualified acceptance of the duty imposed by the Ghost, takes the form of violent self-accusations for his failure to have avenged his father; then, with an obvious effort, he cries, "Fie upon't, foh! About, my brain" [II. ii. 587-88], and turns his mind to the world of reality and the practical consideration with which he is faced: the fact that the Ghost may be the Devil, and that therefore he has arranged the play-within-the-play, hopeful of proving to himself his right to slay Claudius. The phrase, "About, my brain", is clear indication of Hamlet's realization that he is confronted by two diametrically opposite criteria of values, the one unreasonable in its demands and quite mystifying, the other realistic and understandable, and each completely isolated from the other.

Both the compelling nature of Hamlet's inner conscience and the fact that it has no information of the external obstacles that have deterred the motive of vengeance are irrefutably testified by the final appearance of Hamlet senior's ghost. Unseen and unheard by his mother, who is present, it speaks to him from the realm of the inner mind: "This visitation / Is but to whet thy almost blunted purpose" [III. iv. 110-11]. The embodiment of Hamlet's conscience is ultimate proof of what has been tormenting him from the time of his first encounter with the Ghost—then a ghost of revenge-when he was intrusted with its "dread command". The longer Hamlet must delay in carrying out his pledge—first, for absolute proof of Claudius's guilt, later for the "fitting hour"—the more forcible are the demands of the superego that its dictate of prompt vengeance in obedience to his father be fulfilled. "The tension", wrote Freud [in his An Outline of Psychoanalysis], "between the demands of the conscience and the actual attainments of the ego [whether misdeeds or 'unexecuted intentions'] is experienced as a sense of guilt", which, as he stresses elsewhere, is "contributed by a superego that has grown peculiarly severe and cruel". It is inevitable, therefore, that Hamlet, whose conscience is unable to comprehend the problems imposed on him by the real world, falls victim to a marked guilt complex. Freud and other psychoanalysts have pointed out that only through abasement and self-injury can the neurotic's sense of guilt (described by them as basically unconscious) be relieved: "Self-torments of melancholiacs . . . are without doubt pleasurable" [Collected Papers]. Dr. Martin W. Peck is more explicit [in his The Meaning of Psychoanalysis]: The neurotic finds "relief from guilt by abasement and self-punishment"—and, as he later states, "by self-depreciation". As Hamlet's guilt complex becomes unbearably strong, he relies instinctively on the only available remedy—abasement and self-torment. By undeservedly reproaching himself for weakness of character, in particular by transposing the causes that obstruct his vengeance from external obstacles to himself, Hamlet can temporarily assuage the painful sense of guilt and gain relief from it. He undergoes what Dr. A. A. Brill has termed [in his Freud's Contribution to Psychiatry] an "emotional catharsis" that follows the fulfillment of the "need for punishment". His self-reproaches for not having avenged his father suggest
that he becomes at times conscious of the precise nature of the superego's dictate; according to Freud and Brill, an awareness of this sort, though not found in most neurotic disorders, is not uncommon among melancholicias: "In melancholia, the ego humbly submits to the criticism and tyrannical oppression of the superego and admits its guilt." Hamlet's other methods of abasement—for example, his ludicrous appearance in "doublet all unbrac'd" before Ophelia [II. i. 75]—are less directly related to the demands of the conscience; but, like his self-accusations, they are means of satisfying a need for punishment and attest to a potent sense of guilt.

Hamlet's procrastination, consequently, is apparent, not real. Since circumstances—prior to his ruthless betrayal of the King's henchmen, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern—have rendered impossible the performance of a well-planned act of aggression against his father's murderer, he is forced to rely on self-incrimination to calm the storms of the superego, which, lying largely in the unconscious mind, is unable to evaluate the external problems and hence imposes an unreasonable dictate upon the ego, or consciousness. In this respect, it is noteworthy that Hamlet's most tempestuous self-accusation, climaxied by "Or ere this / I should have fatted all the region kites / With this slave's offal" [II. ii. 578-80], precedes his outburst against his mother, which is an indirect aggression against Claudius. During and after the scene with his mother, he again reproaches himself for the failure to avenge his father, but less tempestuously: the demands of the superego, having found partial satisfaction in Hamlet's aggressive conduct, are now less strong and, therefore, less a threat to his sanity.

My purpose in this essay has not been to establish a new interpretation of Hamlet's character. I accept the thesis, first emphatically stated by Werder, that Hamlet is a man of action and that he is deterred in his motive of vengeance solely by the external obstacles, among which is the orthodox doubt as to the identity of the Ghost. My purpose has been to explain only the reasons behind Hamlet's self-accusations of delay. These self-reproaches are undoubtedly the factor chiefly responsible for the school which insists that Hamlet's failure in the revenge motive is the result of an innate weakness; on the other hand, the upholders of what has been termed the "external difficulty" theory have been compelled to ignore or to explain them awkwardly. The result, in almost every instance, has been a marked disproportion of criticism. In view of the apparent incompatibility between Hamlet's self-accusations of delay and the manifest external obstacles to his motive of vengeance, evasions or distortions of one or more of the major facts relating to his conduct have been inevitable. As I see it, only the tenets of "conscience"—those of the Elizabethans abetted by those of modern times—can adequately resolve this particular problem. Moreover, these tenets, although they stamp Hamlet as a neurotic, do not contravene the theory that he is a man capable of ruthless action. His failure to execute prompt vengeance upon Claudius does not stem from his neurosis; on the contrary, his neurosis—a potent but temporary guilt complex—is the effect of the inaction which is prolonged by the external problems, and for which he is brought to task by the predetermined and altogether illogical dictates of his conscience. (pp. 183-86)


**Criticism: Revenge in Hamlet**

Réné Girard

[Girard maintains that Hamlet belongs to the Revenge Tragedy genre. Revenge Tragedy is a dramatic form made popular on the English stage by Thomas Kyd, a contemporary of Shakespeare, whose Spanish Tragedy is an early example of the type. Such a play calls for the revenge of a father by a son or vice versa, an act which is initiated by the murdered man's ghost. Other devices found in Revenge Tragedies include hesitation by the hero, real or feigned madness, suicide, intrigue, and murders on stage. In the critic's opinion,
Shakespeare despised the Revenge Tragedy genre as a form whose conventions had become trite. Yet, because revenge theater was highly popular among Elizabethan audiences, the dramatist had to conform to certain guidelines of the genre to produce a financially successful tragedy. As a result, Shakespeare innovated the theatrical type by creating a double entendre (double meaning) in which he subtly denounced the banality of revenge theater without denying the audience its katharsis (a purification of emotions stirred by tragic conflict). Shakespeare expressed his disgust for revenge theater through Hamlet's deplored revenge throughout the play, yet fulfilled his audience's expectations for a tragic conclusion. Girard also discusses Hamlet's use of "mimetic models," by which he attempts to put himself in the necessary frame of mind to murder Claudius by mimicking other characters' actions. According to the critic, Hamlet projects his desire for revenge first through the actor who enacts the Hecuba speech, and then through Gertrude, but it is Laertes, who acts without thinking, who serves as the "mimetic model" which finally motivates Hamlet to kill the king. Girard concludes his discussion by drawing an analogy between Hamlet and modern society. 

Hamlet's dilemma essentially represents the modern day evolution of society to a "no man's land," the critic argues, where revenge remains a force upon which we often dwell, but seldom act.

Hamlet belongs to the genre of the revenge tragedy, as hackneyed and yet inescapable in Shakespeare's days as the "thriller" in ours to a television writer. . . . The weariness with revenge and katharsis [a purification of emotions stirred by tragic conflict] which can be read, I believe, in the margins of the earlier plays must really exist because, in Hamlet, it moves to the center of the stage and becomes fully articulated.

Some writers who were not necessarily the most unimaginative found it difficult, we are told, to postpone for the whole duration of the lengthy Elizabethan play an action which had never been in doubt in the first place and which is always the same anyway. Shakespeare can turn this tedious chore into the most brilliant feat of theatrical double entendre [double meaning] because the tedium of revenge is really what he wants to talk about, and he wants to talk about it in the usual Shakespearean fashion; he will denounce the revenge theater and all its works with the utmost daring without denying his mass audience the katharsis it demands, without depriving himself of the dramatic success which is necessary to his own career as a dramatist.

If we assume that Shakespeare really had this double goal in mind, we will find that some unexplained details in the play become intelligible and that the function of many obscure scenes becomes obvious.

In order to perform revenge with conviction, you must believe in the justice of your own cause. . . . [The] revenge seeker will not believe in his own cause unless he believes in the guilt of his intended victim. And the guilt of that intended victim entails in turn the innocence of that victim's victim. If the victim's victim is already a killer and if the revenge seeker reflects a little too much on the circularity of revenge, his faith in vengeance must collapse.

This is exactly what we have in Hamlet. It cannot be without a purpose that Shakespeare suggests the old Hamlet, the murdered king, was a murderer himself. In the various sources of the play there may be indications to that effect, but Shakespeare would have omitted them if he had wanted to strengthen the case for revenge. However nasty Claudius may look, he cannot look nasty enough if he appears in a context of previous revenge; he cannot generate, as a villain, the absolute passion and dedication which is demanded of Hamlet. The problem with Hamlet is that he cannot forget the context. As a result, the crime by Claudius looks to him like one more link in an already long chain, and his own revenge will look like still another link, perfectly identical to all the other links.

In a world where every ghost, dead or alive, can only perform the same action, revenge, or clamor for more of the same from beyond the grave, all voices are interchangeable. You can never know with certainty which ghost is addressing whom. It is one and the same thing for Hamlet to question his own identity and to question the ghost's identity, and his authority.
To seek singularity in revenge is a vain enterprise but to shrink from revenge, in a world which looks upon it as a "sacred duty" is to exclude oneself from society, to become a nonentity once more. There is no way out for Hamlet and he shifts endlessly from one impasse to the other, unable to make up his mind because neither choice makes sense.

If all characters are caught in a cycle of revenge that extends in all directions beyond the limits of its action, Hamlet has no beginning and no end. The play collapses. The trouble with the hero is that he does not believe in his play half as much as the critics do. He understands revenge and the theater too well to assume willingly a role chosen for him by others. His sentiments are those, in other words, which we have surmised in Shakespeare himself. What the hero feels in regard to the act of revenge, the creator feels in regard to revenge as theater.

The public wants vicarious victims and the playwright must oblige. Tragedy is revenge. Shakespeare is tired of revenge, and yet he cannot give it up, or he gives up his audience and his identity as a playwright. Shakespeare turns a typical revenge topic, Hamlet, into a meditation on his predicament as a playwright. (pp. 173-75)

There would be no Hamlet "problem" if the hero really believed what he says. It is also himself, therefore, that he is trying to convince. The anger in his voice and the exaggeration of his language with its coldly contrived metaphors suggest that he labors in vain:

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Look here upon this picture, and on this
The counterfeit presentment of two brothers.
See what a grace was seated on this brow.
Hyperion's curls, the front of Jove himself,
An eye like Mars, to threaten and command . . .
A combination and a form indeed
Where every god did seem to set his seal
To give the world assurance of a man.
This was your husband. Look you now what follows.
Here is your husband, like a mildewed ear,
Blasting his wholesome brother. Have you eyes?
[III. iv. 53-65]
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The gentleman doth protest too much. The symmetry of the whole presentation, and of Hamlet's own expressions tend to reassert the resemblance he denies: "This was your husband . . . / Here is your husband, . . . ."

Hamlet begs his mother to give up her conjugal relationship with Claudius. The tons of Freud which have been poured over the passage have obscured its significance. Hamlet does not feel indignant enough to rush out and kill the villain. As a result he feels uncomfortable about himself and he blames his mother because she obviously feels even more indifferent to the whole affair than he does. He would like his mother to initiate the revenge process for him. He tries to arouse in her the indignation he himself cannot feel, in order to catch it secondhand from her, perhaps, out of some kind of mimetic sympathy. Between Gertrude and Claudius he would like to see a dramatic break that would force him to side resolutely with his mother.

It is a generally accepted view nowadays that Gertrude must have felt a tremendous attachment to Claudius. Far from confirming that view, the following lines suggest exactly the opposite:

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Nor sense to ecstasy was ever so thralled
But it reserved some quantity of choice
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Hamlet does not say that his mother is madly in love with Claudius; he says that even if she were, she should still be able to perceive some difference between her two husbands. Hamlet assumes, therefore, that his mother like himself, perceives no difference whatever. This assumption is obviously correct. Gertrude remains silent during her son's tirade because she has nothing to say. The reason she could marry the two brothers in rapid succession is that they are so much alike and she feels the same indifference to the one as to the other. It is this overwhelming indifference that Hamlet perceives and he resents it because he is trying to fight it in himself. Like so many other queens of Shakespeare, like the queens of Richard III, for instance, Gertrude moves in a world where prestige and power count more than passion. (pp. 176-77)

What Hamlet needs, in order to stir up his vengeful spirit, is a revenge theater more convincing than his own, something less half-hearted than the play Shakespeare is actually writing. Fortunately for the hero and for the spectators who are eagerly awaiting their final bloodbath, Hamlet has many opportunities to watch rousing spectacles during his play and he tries to generate even more, in a conscientious effort to put himself in the right mood for the murder of Claudius. Hamlet must receive from someone else, a mimetic model, the impulse which he does not find in himself. This is what he tried to achieve with his mother, we found, and he did not succeed. He is much more successful with the actor who impersonates for him the role of Hecuba, It becomes obvious, at this point, that the only hope for Hamlet to accomplish what his society—or the spectators—require, is to become as "sincere" a showman as the actor who can shed real tears when he pretends to be the queen of Troy!

Is it not monstrous that this player here,
But in a fiction, in a dream of passion,
Could force his soul so to his own conceit
That from her working all his visage wanned,
Tears in his eyes, distraction in's aspect,
A broken voice, and his whole function suiting
With forms to his conceit? And all for nothing!
For Hecuba!
What's Hecuba to him or he to Hecuba,
That he should weep for her? What would he do
Had he the motive and the cue for passion
That I have?
[II. ii. 551-62]

Another catchy example for Hamlet comes from the army of Fortinbras on its way to Poland. The object of the war is a worthless speck of land. Thousands of people must risk their lives:

Even for an eggshell. Rightly to be great
Is not to stir without great argument,
But greatly to find quarrel in a straw
When Honor's at the stake.
[IV. iv. 53-6]

The scene is as ridiculous as it is sinister. It would not impress Hamlet so much if the hero truly believed in the superiority and urgency of his cause. His words constantly betray him, here as in the scene with his mother. As a cue for passion, his revenge motif is no more compelling, really, than the cue of an actor on the stage. He too must greatly . . . find quarrel in a straw, he too must stake everything even for an eggshell.
The effect of the army scene obviously stems, at least in part, from the large number of people involved, from the almost infinite multiplication of the example which cannot fail to increase its mimetic attraction enormously. Shakespeare is too much a master of mob effects not to remember at this point the cumulative effect of mimetic models. In order to whip up enthusiasm for the war against Claudius, the same irrational contagion is needed as in the war against Poland. The type of mimetic incitement from which Hamlet "benefits" at this point resembles very much the kind of spectacle which governments never fail to organize for their citizenry when they have decided it is time to go to war: a rousing military parade.

But it is not the actor, ultimately, or the army of Fortinbras; it is Laertes, I believe, who determines Hamlet to act. Laertes provides the most persuasive spectacle not because he provides the "best" example but because his situation parallels that of Hamlet. Being Hamlet's peer, at least up to a point, his passionate stance constitutes the most powerful challenge imaginable. In such circumstances, even the most apathetic man's sense of emulation must rise to such a pitch that the sort of disaster that the fulfillment of the revenge demands can finally be achieved.

The simple and unreflective Laertes can shout to Claudius "give me my father" [IV. v. 117] and then leap into his sister's grave in a wild demonstration of grief. Like a well-adjusted gentleman or a consummate actor, he can perform with the utmost sincerity all the actions his social milieu demands, even if they contradict each other. He can mourn the useless death of a human being at one minute and the next he can uselessly kill a dozen more if he is told that his honor is at stake. The death of his father and sister are almost less shocking to him than the lack of pomp and circumstance at their burial. At the rites of Ophelia, Laertes keeps asking the priest for "more ceremony." Laertes is a formalist and he reads the tragedy of which he is a part very much like the formalists of all stripes. He does not question the validity of revenge. He does not question the literary genre. He does not question the relationship between revenge and mourning. These are not valid critical questions to him: they never enter his mind, just as it never occurs to most critics that Shakespeare himself could question the validity of revenge.

Hamlet watches Laertes leap into Ophelia's grave and the effect on him is electrifying. The reflective mood of the conversation with Horatio gives way to a wild imitation of the rival's theatrical mourning. At this point, he has obviously decided that he, too, would act according to the demands of society, that he would become another Laertes in other words. He, too, as a result, must leap into the grave of one who has already died, even as he prepares other graves for those still alive:

'Swounds, show me what thou'lt do.  
Woo't weep? Woo't fight? Woo't fast? Woo't tear thyself?  
Woo't drink up eisel? Eat a crocodile?  
I'll do't. Dost thou come here to whine?  
To outface me with leaping in her grave?  
Be buried quick with her, and so will I. . . .  
I'll rant as well as thou.  
[V. i. 274-79, 284]

In order to embrace the goal of revenge, Hamlet must enter the circle of mimetic desire and rivalry; this is what he has been unable to achieve so far but here he finally reaches a hysterical pitch of that "pale and bloodless emulation" . . . (pp. 177-80)

Shakespeare can place these incredible lines in the mouth of Hamlet without undermining the dramatic credibility of what follows. Following the lead of Gertrude, the spectators will ascribe the outburst to "madness."
This is mere madness. And thus awhile the fit will work on him.
Anon, as patient as the female dove
When that her golden couplets are disclosed,
His silence will sit drooping.
[V. i. 284-88]

A little later Hamlet himself, now calmly determined to kill Claudius, will recall the recent outburst in most significant words:

I am very sorry, good Horatio,
That to Laertes I forgot myself,
For by the image of my cause I see
The portraiture of his. I'll court his favors.
But, sure, the bravery of his grief did put me
Into a towering passion.
[V. ii. 75-80]

Like all victims of mimetic suggestion, Hamlet reverses the true hierarchy between the other and himself. He should say: "by the image of his cause I see the portraiture of mine." This is the correct formula, obviously, for all the spectacles that have influenced Hamlet. The actor's tears and the military display of Fortinbras were already presented as mimetic models. In order to realize that Laertes, too, functions as a model, the last two lines are essential. The cool determination of Hamlet, at this point, is the transmutation of the "towering passion" which he had vainly tried to build up before and which Laertes has finally communicated to him through the "bravery of his grief." This transmutation is unwittingly predicted by Gertrude when she compares Hamlet to the dove who becomes quiet after she has laid her eggs. Gertrude only thinks of Hamlet's previous changes of mood, as sterile as they were sudden, but her metaphor suggests a more tangible accomplishment, the birth of something portentous:

Anon, as patient as the female dove
When that her golden couplets are disclosed,
His silence will sit drooping.
[V. i. 286-88]
(pp. 180-181)

In *Hamlet*, the very absence of a case against revenge becomes a powerful intimation of what the modern world is really about. Even at those later stages in our culture when physical revenge and blood feuds completely disappeared or were limited to such marginal milieux as the underworld, it would seem that no revenge play, not even a play of reluctant revenge, could strike a really deep chord in the modern psyche. In reality the question is never entirely settled and the strange void at the center of *Hamlet* becomes a symbolic expression of the Western and modern malaise, no less powerful than the most brilliant attempts to define the problem, such as Dostoevsky's underground revenge. Our "symptoms" always resemble that unnamable paralysis of the will, that ineffable corruption of the spirit that affect not only Hamlet, but the other characters as well. The devious ways of these characters, the bizarre plots they hatch, their passion for watching without being watched, their propensity to voyeurism and spying, the general disease of human relations make a good deal of sense as a description of an undifferentiated no man's land between revenge and no revenge in which we ourselves are still living.

Claudius resembles Hamlet in his inability to take a prompt and healthy revenge on his enemies. The king should react more explicitly and decisively to the murder of Polonius who was, after all, his private councillor; the crime was a personal offense to him. His reasons for hesitating, then acting only in secret, may
be different from Hamlet's but the final result is the same. When Laertes asks Claudius why he failed to
punish a murderer, the reply betrays embarrassment.

Even Claudius presents Hamlet-like symptoms. Not Hamlet alone but the time is out of joint. And when
Hamlet describes his revenge as "sick," or "dull," he speaks for the whole community. In order to appreciate
the nature and the extent of the disease, we must realize that all behavior we tend to read as strategic or
conspiratorial, in that play, can also be read as symptomatic of "sick revenge." (pp. 192-93)

Everybody must conceive the same strategic tricks at the same tune and the reciprocity which everybody tries
to sidestep simultaneously and through the same means must still win in the long run. Strategic thinking, as a
result, demands ever increasing subtlety; it involves less and less action, more and more calculation. In the
end, it becomes difficult to distinguish strategy from procrastination. The very notion of strategy may be
strategic in regard to the self-defeating nature of revenge which no one wants to face, not yet at least, so that
the possibility of revenge is not entirely removed from the scene. Thanks to the notion of strategy, men can
postpone revenge indefinitely without ever giving it up. They are equally terrified by both radical solutions
and they go on living as long as possible, if not forever, in the no man's land of sick revenge.

In that no man's land it becomes impossible to define anything. All actions and motivations are their own
opposites as well as themselves. When Hamlet does not seize the opportunity to kill Claudius during his
prayer, it could be a failure of the will or a supreme calculation; it could be instinctive humaneness or a
refinement of cruelty. Hamlet himself does not know. The crisis of Degree has reached the most intimate
recesses of the individual consciousness. Human sentiments have become as mixed up as the seasons of the
year in A Midsummer Night's Dream. Even he who experiences them can no longer say which is which, and
the critic's search for neat differentiations misses the point entirely. Most interpreters cling to the illusion that
differences alone must be real behind deceptive similarities, whereas the opposite is true. Similarities alone
are real. We must not be misled by Ophelia's blond hair and pitiable death. Or rather, we must realize that
Shakespeare consciously misleads his less attentive spectators with these gross theatrical signs of what a pure
heroine should be. Just like Rosenkrans and Guildenstern, Ophelia allows herself to become an instrument in
the hands of her father and of the king. She, too, is affected by the disease of the time. Another sign of her
contamination is her language and behavior which are both contaminated with the erotic strategy of a Cressida
and the other least savory Shakespearean heroines. What Hamlet resents in Ophelia is what any human being
always resents in another human being, the visible signs of his own sickness. It is the same sickness, therefore,
that corrupts Ophelia's love for Hamlet and debases Hamlet's love for the theater. (pp. 193-94)

To read Hamlet against revenge is anachronistic, some people say, because it goes against the conventions of
the revenge genre. No doubt, but could Shakespeare be playing according to the rules of the game at one level
and undermine these same rules at another? Has not this ambiguous practice become a commonplace of
modern criticism? Is Shakespeare too slow-witted for such a device? Indications abound that in many other
plays, he is doing precisely that, still providing the crowd with the spectacle they demand while
simultaneously writing between the lines, for all those who can read, a devastating critique of that same
spectacle?

If we fear that Hamlet, in the present perspective, becomes a pretext, once more, for comments on the
contemporary situation, let us look at the alternative. The traditional perspectives on Hamlet are far from
neutral; their first consequence is that the ethics of revenge are taken for granted. The most debatable question
of the play cannot be reached; we exclude it a priori [from prior knowledge].

Hamlet's problem thus shifts from revenge itself to hesitation in the face of revenge. Why should a
well-educated young man have second thoughts when it comes to killing a close relative who also happens to
be the king of the land and the husband of his own mother? This is some enigma indeed and the problem is
not that a satisfactory answer has never been found but that we should expect to find one after our *a priori* exclusion of the one sensible and obvious answer.

Should our enormous critical literature on *Hamlet* fall some day into the hands of people otherwise ignorant of our mores, they could not fail to conclude that our academic tribe must have been a savage breed, indeed. After four centuries of controversies, Hamlet's temporary reluctance to commit murder still looks so outlandish to us that more and more books are being written in an unsuccessful effort to solve that mystery. The only way to account for this curious body of literature is to suppose that, back in the twentieth century no more was needed than some ghost to ask for it, and the average professor of literature would massacre his entire household without batting an eyelash.

Contrary to the official doctrine among us, the insertion of Hamlet into our contemporary situation, and in particular the reference to something as apparently alien to literature as our nuclear predicament, cannot lead the critic further astray than he already is; it cannot distract him from his proper function which is to read the text. Amazingly enough, the effect is just the opposite. The nuclear reference can shock us back into a sense of reality. It is symptomatic of our condition, no doubt, that we avoid more and more the real issues, and we empty great literary texts of all affective and even intellectual content as we really intend to do the opposite, as we try to concentrate exclusively upon these same texts by excluding only what is extraneous to them.

Let us imagine a contemporary Hamlet with his finger on a nuclear button. After forty years of procrastination he has not yet found the courage to push that button. The critics around him are becoming impatient. The psychiatrists have volunteered their services and come up with their usual answer. Hamlet is a sick man. (pp. 196-97)

Almost all critics today stick to the ethics of revenge. The psychiatrist sees the very thought of its abandonment as an illness he must cure, and the traditional critic sees revenge as a literary rule he must respect. Others still try to read *Hamlet* through one of the popular ideologies of our time, like political rebellion, the absurd, the individual's right to an aggressive personality, etc. It is no accident if the sanctity of revenge provides a perfect vehicle for all the masks of modern *ressentiment* [resentment]. The remarkable consensus in favor of revenge verifies, I believe, the conception of the play as that no man's land between total revenge and no revenge at all, that specifically modern space where everything becomes suffused with sick revenge.

It is fashionable nowadays to claim that we inhabit an entirely new world in which even our greatest masterpieces have become irrelevant. I would be the last one to deny that there is something unique about our world, but there is something unique also about *Hamlet*, and we may well be deceiving ourselves in order not to face a type of relevance we do not want to welcome.

We must declare irrelevant not *Hamlet* but the wall of conventions and ritualism with which we surround the play, in the name of innovation almost as often as in the name of tradition. As more events, objects, and attitudes around us proclaim the same message ever more loudly, in order not to hear that message, we must condemn more of our experience to insignificance and absurdity. With our most fashionable critics today we have reached the point when history must make no sense, art must make no sense, language and sense itself must make no sense. (p. 198)

*Hamlet* is no mere word game. We can make sense out of *Hamlet* just as we can make sense out of our world, by reading both against revenge. This is the way Shakespeare wanted *Hamlet* to be read and the way it should have been read long ago. If now, at such a time in our history, we still cannot read *Hamlet* against revenge, who ever will? (p. 200)

Criticism: Melancholy and Grief in Hamlet

Oscar James Campbell

[Campbell contends that the nature of Hamlet's melancholy, or state of depression, was more easily perceived by an Elizabethan audience than by a modern one. Further, the critic asserts that while Hamlet is indeed emotionally unstable, he is not insane. Shakespeare dramatizes the prince's changeability by altering the mood of the play's structure from periods of meditative pauses to bursts of action. Since Hamlet is usually at the center of these pauses and surges, his character conveys a manic-depressive quality. In essence, his depressed phase is marked by brooding inaction, whereas his manic phase includes abrupt lunges toward action. Campbell asserts that Hamlet is more than a "creature of psychotic impulse," however, for Shakespeare generates sympathy for him by "enabling his melancholy to express itself in some of the most profound philosophical lyrics ever written in the English language." Because of his emotional state, the critic continues, Hamlet in some ways represents an Elizabethan stock character known as a "malcontent." A malcontent is a figure whose perspective of life is so pessimistic that he holds nothing but contempt for the world and humanity. In Act V, Hamlet reaches his highest point of excitement through his "hysterical" struggle with Laertes during the sword fight, and this emotion enables him to take revenge in the final catastrophe. Thus, Campbell concludes, Hamlet's revenge "ironically appears, not as an act of solemn retribution, but as an uncalculated result of the frantic brandishing of a murderous sword."

Something very serious is the matter with Hamlet. And the full meaning of the great tragedy will never be clear until critics discover in the drama a conscious artistic design pertinent both to Hamlet the tortured man and to the events in the play.

We must, then, make an honest effort to discover just what ails Hamlet. Everyone knows that he is melancholy, but few realize that to Shakespeare's audiences the precise nature of his emotional disturbance was much more easily recognizable than to an audience today. Melancholy was a malady described at length in all their household medical handbooks. Elizabethan doctors, like the practitioners of our own day, were making careful attempts to analyze its symptoms. The fact that their analyses completed three centuries ago were naive and inexact need not concern us. In any case, Shakespeare, a busy dramatist, was perhaps only imperfectly acquainted with their diagnoses. But he was certainly far from ignorant of them. Moreover, in everyday conversation in Shakespeare's time, "melancholy" was probably as often referred to as the "inferiority complex" is today—and there can be no doubt that any dramatic character who described himself as suffering from an inferiority complex would explain himself to a modern audience immediately.

Besides, Shakespeare may well have had many chances to observe victims of the disease that his contemporaries referred to as "melancholy." In Elizabeth's day, persons with nervous afflications were confined only for actual dementia. And Hamlet is in no sense irrational. His mind is unimpaired. Circumstances which have put an irresistible strain upon his self-control have rendered him emotionally unstable, but certainly not mad.

Persons in such a mental state as his were not imprisoned or even given systematic medical treatment in Elizabethan times. Hence many cases of "melancholy" were at large in society and easily recognizable. Anyone who has an opportunity to watch a victim of this sort of emotional disturbance cannot fail to identify its symptoms. And Shakespeare, the keenest of observers, would see at once that in many men whom he called "melancholy" the moods of uncontrolled excitement alternated with periods of deep depression. He would also notice that these two pathological states succeeded each other with a kind of mechanical regularity.
It is here, I think, that the key to Hamlet's character must be sought. That alternation of mood Shakespeare seized upon to form the inner structure of his play. One of Shakespeare's favorite dramatic practices was to force the current of his play to fluctuate between meditative pauses and bursts of action. All of his tragic heroes in the very fever of the dramatic action stand aside from the rush of events long enough to soliloquize reflectively upon themselves and the plots in which they are involved. The rhythmic vacillation in Hamlet's emotions is thus a subtle variant of one of the favorite devices of Shakespeare's stagecraft. Moreover, adverse fate so times the rhythm of Hamlet's malady that at any given moment he is in the grip of the emotions which fit him least to deal with the situation confronting him. When the circumstances demand action, he finds himself so deeply depressed that he can do nothing but brood. When he needs his finest poise to wield the weapon of his reason, he is beaten by gusts of uncontrollable excitement. With each new revelation of this irrepresible conflict Hamlet's inner tension mounts until at the final catastrophe his tortured will explodes in a wild frenzy of unconsidered action.

A brief review of the dramatic movement of the tragedy will show how regular is the beat of its pulse. When Hamlet first appears, he is already profoundly depressed. He has been overwhelmed by grief at his father's death and his mother's "o'erhasty marriage" [II. ii. 57] to his uncle. Life has lost its meaning. It is vile and empty. He longs for death—for the moral right to kill himself. Such is the depth of his dejection even before the ghost of his father lays upon him the supremely difficult task.

From this depression Hamlet is briefly rescued by the appearance of his old friend Horatio. Shakespeare takes advantage of the moment to show his audience what Hamlet was like before grief had overwhelmed him. Here and on various other occasions in the play, the hero's natural charm and graciousness shine forth. Those short intervals of emotional equilibrium occur, as in the present case, during his transition from depression to mad elation. They come with the reappearance of friends out of his untroubled past—of Horatio or of the actors in whom he had always taken delight. Such brief glimpses of the normal Hamlet add poignancy to the abnormal seizures that follow as the night the day.

After the ghost has described the circumstances of his murder and has laid upon his son the duty of revenge, Hamlet for the first time becomes frenzied. Then he wildly beseeches aid from the spirits of earth, of heaven, even of hell. He shouts to the skies his execrations of Claudius, "O villain, villain, smiling, damned villain" [I. v. 106]. He answers Horatio's solicitous questions with "wild and whirling words" [I. v. 133]. His uncontrolled tumult is presently intensified by the strange actions of the ghost, who gives Hamlet orders from the cellargage, as though he were one of the demons who dwelt underground, a familiar of the Devil. In order to shut Marcellus's mouth, Hamlet cooperates in the deception. He rushes from one part of the stage to another as the ghost moves under him. Consequently, the spirit's effort to protect a secret which only the avenger must know, ironically compels Hamlet to dance about in what seems to be a wild paroxysm of excitement.

It is during this seizure that Hamlet decides to feign madness. Every critic knows that, as an aid to his revenge, the pretense is a mistake. Hamlet's reason for donning emotional motley may well have been subjective, an instinctive impulse towards self-protection. He realizes that his emotions are often going to rush beyond his control. The fiction that he is mad will not only cloak his designs against the King, but will also free him from any necessity to control the uncontrollable. During the rest of the play, Hamlet's feigned madness is merely his acquiescence in the two-fold intensities of his melancholy.

By the end of the first act, the audience has been given a full view of both phases of Hamlet's emotional disturbance. But only the most discerning would catch so soon its inner rhythm. His malady must continue to fall to its ebb and mount to its crest before its regular configuration becomes unmistakable. The next time that Hamlet appears to any characters in the play, he is obviously under the spell of his depression. He visits Ophelia in the complete disarray that literary tradition had made the inevitable symptom of the melancholy of a rejected lover. An irresistible impulse had driven him for sympathy to the woman he still loved even though she seemed no longer to return his affection. Hamlet's carefully prepared deshabille shows that he had given
his impulse full rein. Yet his inability to utter a word in Ophelia's presence is proof of the tragic depth of his depression.

When Hamlet next appears on the stage, his clothes should be in the disorder which Ophelia has described. His mind, too, is pervaded by the same gloom. His ridicule of Polonius is not light-hearted. The figures of speech in which he clothes his abhorrence are all drawn from the low and physically disgusting—maggots, carrion, wrinkled faces, weak hams, and thick discharge oozing from the eyes. Through such symbols as these Shakespeare translates intellectual pessimism into poetic feeling.

From this new "low" in his depression Hamlet is rescued by the actors who come to play at Elsinore. They carry him out of the dreary present into the happy days when the theatre moved and delighted him as it did many cultivated gentlemen of the Renaissance. Once his emotions are swept clean by the breath from his healthful past, he is able to plan and to act. But just as soon as the players leave him alone, he again becomes the slave of his malady, and his mood mounts quickly to emotional tumult. He unpacks his heart again with wild and whirling words, which he shouts to the unresponsive air. He has again swept from gloom to uncontrolled excitement.

At this point in the play, the intelligent members of Shakespeare's audience should sense the rhythm of Hamlet's melancholy. They should also realize what are to be the characteristic dramatic expressions of each of its phases. The depressed phase is to be marked by brooding inaction, by the utterance of pessimistic ideas clothed in poetic images borrowed from physical dissolution and from low and disgusting forms of life. The heightened phase will be characterized by violent lunges towards action, by expressions in which excitement exaggerates and obscures the sense, and even by exclamations that resemble the inarticulate cries of a wounded animal. But most important for the comprehension of the play, the audience will now understand that Hamlet's mood of sluggish depression is to be followed by a seizure of feverish excitement; and that, though the length of the intervals between the two states may vary, they will succeed each other with clock-like regularity. When these characteristics of the play are clearly understood, clarity takes the place of perplexity. Hamlet's actions no longer form a puzzle. By understanding the cause of even his wildest emotional seizures, we can look forward, not with bewilderment, but with tense expectancy, to the forms which his tragic melancholy must inevitably assume.

This clue to the aesthetic movement of the action makes Hamlet's conduct clear at many crises in the play. It explains, for example, why he could not kill the King when he came upon him at prayer. At that moment, a mood of depression darkened Hamlet's mind—the inevitable reaction to the excitement he had just felt at the success of his play in catching the conscience of the King. His will is paralyzed. Resolute action of any sort is beyond his power. So he cannot make use of the heaven-sent opportunity to revenge his father's murder. No other scene in the play is so fully charged with tragic irony.

When we next see Hamlet, he is in his mother's chamber beseeching her to break off all sexual relations with King Claudius. Only thus can she save her soul. Now if ever Hamlet should be undisputed master of all his faculties. Only calm severity can make the solemn impression upon his mother which the situation demands. Yet we see at once that he has again become a slave to his recurrent excitement, and we anticipate only the wildest goings-on. Our worst fears are realized; for he kills Polonius in a frantic lunge through the arras, he scolds his mother in a frenzy of excitement, he talks to the vacant air, and finally, he rushes off the stage, dragging Polonius's body by the heels. None of these acts really surprises us. They fill us with pity and terror, for we realize that Hamlet's emotional tumult has rendered worse than futile his visit to the Queen. Its sole result has been to convince his mother that he is mad indeed. This conflict between the clock of Hamlet's malady and the situations which face him persists to the end of the drama. It defeats all his impulses towards action and increasingly paralyzes his will.
But Hamlet is more than this creature of psychotic impulse dancing between gloom and febrile agitation. Otherwise he never would have been universally acclaimed as the greatest character in dramatic fiction. His mind seems to have a reach and a depth greater in both degree and kind than any other tragic hero in all literature. Shakespeare establishes this transcendence of Hamlet largely by enabling his melancholy to express itself in some of the most profound philosophical lyrics ever written in the English language. When Hamlet falls into the depressed phase of his malady, his mind is corroded by skepticism and pessimism. Then he feels that human life is meaningless and that the universe is a foul and pestilent congregation of vapors. In expressing his despair he is not giving voice to Shakespeare's personal dejection. He is rather invoking a mood congenial to many men of his age. For even while Elizabethan audiences were charmed by the verbal harmonies which rang through Hamlet's melancholy utterances, they must frequently have detected in them commonplace of late Renaissance pessimism. (pp. 311-17)

On occasions Hamlet also conforms to another current dramatic conception of the melancholy man. He allows his disgust with life to turn to derision of the world and of all human life. That is, he takes on the color of a conventional stage character called "the malcontent." Jaques in As You Like It is cast for this role. His greatest delight is to sit at his ease and "rail against our mistress the world, and all our misery" [As You Like It, III. ii. 278-79]. The humorously bleak view of life which he expresses in the soliloquy beginning "All the world's a stage" [As You Like It, II. vii. 139ff.] is evidence not of Shakespeare's descent into the depths but of the malcontent's habit of mind.

When Hamlet betrays the satiric impulses of a malcontent, his remarks give edge both to his depression and to his burst of hysterical playfulness. When he strikes out against women's use of cosmetics, he is at once a tortured lover and a satirist practising his art on one of the timeworn subjects of the craft. He cries to Ophelia, "I have heard of your paintings, too, well enough. God has given you one face, and you make yourselves another: you jog, you amble, you lisp, and nickname God's creatures." [III. i. 142-45]. When he is making a fool of Polonius, he flings at him the remarks about old men which had been stock ridicule since the dawn of satire. "The satirical rogue," begins Hamlet, referring to the author of the book he has been reading, "says here that old men have grey beards, that their faces are wrinkled, their eyes purging thick amber and plum-tree gum, and that they have a plentiful lack of wit together with most weak hams" [II. ii. 196-200].

Once having understood the nature of Hamlet's pessimistic ideas, the spectator feels the melancholy to be enriched and deepened by the philosophical terms in which it is expressed. And once having sensed the rhythmic beat of Hamlet's inner life, an audience is borne through the exciting events of the plot on the irresistible tide of the character's fluctuating emotion to the final catastrophe. It thus becomes the supreme dramatic utterance of Hamlet's psychological essence.

Critics who think of Hamlet as a purely contemplative man have assumed that Shakespeare made him too introspective a person to do the final deeds demanded by the plot. In the last act, so they say, Shakespeare's Hamlet disappears to make way for an automaton better able to bring to a climax the old tale of revenge. But there is no such artistic hiatus in the drama. The pendulum of Hamlet's melancholy continues to swing during the fifth act just as it has done throughout the play. Only now, as we near the catastrophe, its beat becomes more and more agitated.

The last act carries Hamlet from his despairing and macabre mood in the churchyard through his hysterical struggle with Laertes at the edge of Ophelia's grave and on to the final catastrophe. There the hot excitement of the duel, intensified by his discovery of Laertes's treachery, drives Hamlet to the highest point of his excitement. Now at last, instead of abandoning himself to extravagant speech, he plunges into extravagant action. So his revenge ironically appears, not as an act of solemn retribution, but as an uncalculated result of the frantic brandishing of a murderous sword. In acting thus Hamlet has not become a puppet of the plot. He is merely giving us a culminating exhibition of his melancholy and lending final emphasis to the tragic irony of his career.
The fatal wound in Hamlet's breast re-establishes his emotional equilibrium, as physical shocks often do in cases of this kind. With his mental restoration reappears the sweetness and the charm of his uncontaminated personality. Then he finds words to capture and retain for all time the qualities of the man who, in his happy youth, was the ideal prince and gentleman of the Renaissance.

It may be objected that this analysis destroys all the richness of Hamlet's personality, that it reduces him to a mere automaton, driven willy-nilly from one emotional extravagance to another. But the discovery of a simple aesthetic pattern in the tragedy need have no such result. It makes Hamlet's inner nature an integral part of his tragic story. It also banishes much perplexity from the spectators' minds. Hamlet ceases to be an utterly incalculable creature. Holding the clue to the precise nature of his melancholy, we come to a full and sympathetic understanding of his fate. (pp. 319-22)

To the Elizabethan audience familiar with the multifarious ways of melancholy, Hamlet's uncontrollable grief was a complete explanation of his emotional disaster. To us his anguish represents the destructive emotion which lies at the root of every disintegration of the will. For Hamlet is not insane. His reason functions normally, his mind is subtle and acute. His tragedy is inevitable because his emotions become an intricate tangle whenever life confronts him with a demand for action. Every normal man has on occasion been similarly at the mercy of tyrannical feelings. Understanding the life cycle of Hamlet's melancholy, we are able to focus our attention upon the universal meanings implicit in his situation. With emancipated imagination, we are free to feel all the irony, the pathos, and the terror in the most famous of tragedies. (p. 322)


Arthur Kirsch

[Kirsch considers Hamlet a play which generates great intellectual energy, but perhaps more importantly reflects an experience of profound pain and suffering for the protagonist. According to the critic, grief is Hamlet's predominant emotion and thus acts as a controlling force in the play: the prince needs sympathy for his grief, but he does not receive it from the court, his uncle, or, most significantly, his mother. Kirsch then examines how Hamlet's intense anger at his mother has come to be interpreted by some scholars as indicating that he suffers from an Oedipus Complex, a repressed desire to kill his father and marry his mother. Followers of this theory maintain that this psychological disorder is the source of Hamlet's hesitation, for Claudius has carried out the deed which the prince himself had unconsciously wanted to perform. (See the excerpt by Ernest Jones in the section on Hamlet's character.) Questioning the validity of this interpretation, the critic asserts that Shakespeare's purpose in raising the Oedipal question was not "to call Hamlet's character into judgment, but to expand our understanding of the nature and intensity of his suffering." In addition to Gertrude's actions, the Ghost also intensifies Hamlet's grief by repeatedly demanding that he remember him, thus arresting the natural process of mourning and recovery. Another emotional catalyst for the prince is a mounting sense of loss—not only does Hamlet lose his father to death, but he also feels betrayed by his mother, loses the affections of Ophelia, and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, two schoolfriends, serve the king as spies. The critic contends that Act V represents a turning point in Hamlet's character, for, paradoxically, the termination of his grief comes at the same time as his realization that he faces his own death.]

Hamlet is a tragedy perhaps most often, and justly, admired for its intellectual energy. Hamlet's mind comprehends a universe of ideas, and he astonishes us with the copiousness and eloquence and luminousness of his thoughts. But I think we should remember, as Hamlet is compelled to remember, that behind these thoughts, and usually their occasion, is a continuous and tremendous experience of pain and suffering. We are accustomed to thinking of the other major tragedies, Lear and Othello especially, as plays whose greatest genius lies in the depiction of the deepest movements of human feeling. I think we should attend to such
movements in *Hamlet* as well. As Hamlet himself tells us, it is his heart which he unpacks with words, it is against what he calls the "heart-ache" [III. i. 61] of human existence that he protests in his most famous soliloquy (and this is the first use of the term in that sense the *OED* [Oxford English Dictionary] records), and there are few plays in the canon in which the word "heart" itself is more prominent. (p. 17)

In Shakespeare's play... [Hamlet] talks explicitly of sorrow and blood, relating them directly to the ghost as well as each other in the scene in his mother's bedchamber in which the ghost appears for the last time. "Look you," he tells his mother, who characteristically cannot see the ghost,

> how pale he glares.  
> His form and cause conjoin'd, preaching to stones,  
> Would make them capable.—Do not look upon me  
> Lest with this piteous action you convert  
> My stern effects; then what I have to do  
> Will want true colour—tears perchance for blood.  

[III. iv. 125-30]

These lines suggest synapses between grief and vengeance which help make the whole relation between the plot and emotional content of *Hamlet* intelligible, but of more immediate importance to an understanding of the play is Hamlet's own emphasis in this speech, his focus on his grief and the profound impact which the ghost has upon it.

The note of grief is sounded by Hamlet in his first words in the play, before he ever sees the ghost, in his opening dialogue with the King and his mother. The Queen says to him:

> Good Hamlet, cast thy nighted colour off,  
> And let thine eye look like a friend on Denmark.  
> Do not for ever with thy vailed lids  
> Seek for thy noble father in the dust.  
> Thou know'st 'tis common—all that lives must die,  
> Passing through nature to eternity.  

[I. ii. 68-73]

Hamlet answers, "Ay, madam, it is common." "If it be, / Why seems it so particular with thee?" [I. ii. 74-5] she says; and he responds,

> Seems, madam! Nay, it is; I know not seems.  
> 'Tis not alone my inky cloak, good mother,  
> Nor customary suits of solemn black,  
> Nor windy suspiration of forc'd breath,  
> No, nor the fruitful river in the eye,  
> Nor the dejected haviour of the visage,  
> Together with all forms, moods, shapes of grief,  
> That can denote me truly. These, indeed, seem;  
> For they are actions that a man might play;  
> But I have that within which passes show—  
> These but the trappings and the suits of woe.  

[I. ii. 76-86]

Though Hamlet's use of the conventional Elizabethan forms of mourning expresses his hostility to an unfeeling court, he is at the same time speaking deeply of an experience which everyone who has lost
someone close to him must recognize. He is speaking of the early stages of grief, of its shock, of its inner and still hidden sense of loss, and trying to describe what is not fully describable—the literally inexpressible wound whose immediate consequence is the dislocation, if not transvaluation, of our customary perceptions and feelings and attachments to life. It is no accident that this speech sets in motion Hamlet's preoccupation with seeming and being, including the whole train of images of acting which is crystallized in the play within the play. The peculiar centripetal pull of anger and sorrow which the speech depicts remains as the central undercurrent of that preoccupation, most notably in Hamlet's later soliloquy about the player's imitation of Hecuba's grief:

Is it not monstrous that this player here,
But in a fiction, in a dream of passion,
Could force his soul so to his own conceit
That from her working all his visage wann'd;
Tears in his eyes, distraction in's aspect,
A broken voice, and his whole function suiting
With forms to his conceit? And all for nothing!
For Hecuba!
What's Hecuba to him or he to Hecuba,
That he should weep for her? What would he do,
Had he the motive and the cue for passion
That I have?
[II. ii. 551-62]

Hamlet then goes on to rebuke himself for his own inaction, but the player's imitation of grief nonetheless moves him internally, as nothing else can, in fact to take action, as he conceives of the idea of staging a play to test both the ghost and the conscience of the King.

After Hamlet finishes answering his mother in the earlier court scene, the King offers his own consolation for Hamlet's grief:

'Tis sweet and commendable in your nature, Hamlet,
To give these mourning duties to your father;
But you must know your father lost a father;
That father lost lost his; and the survivor bound,
In filial obligation, for some term
To do obsequious sorrow. But to persever
In obstinate condolement is a course
Of impious stubbornness; 'tis unmanly grief;
It shows a will most incorrect to heaven,
A heart unfortified, a mind impatient,
An understanding simple and unschool'd;
For what we know must be, and is as common
As any the most vulgar thing to sense,
Why should we in our peevish opposition
Take it to heart? Fie! 'tis a fault to heaven,
A fault against the dead, a fault to nature,
To reason most absurd; whose common theme
Is death of fathers, and who still hath cried,
From the first corse till he that died to-day,
'This must be so'.
[I. ii. 87-106]
There is much in this consolation of philosophy which is spiritually and psychologically sound, and to which every human being must eventually accommodate himself, but it comes at the wrong time, from the wrong person, and in its essential belittlement of the heartache of grief, it comes with the wrong inflection. It is a dispiriting irony of scholarship on this play that so many psychoanalytic and theological critics should essentially take such words, from such a King, as a text for their own indictments of Hamlet's behavior. What a person who is grieving needs, of course, is not the consolation of words, even words which are true, but sympathy—and this Hamlet does not receive, not from the court, not from his uncle, and more important, not from his own mother, to whom his grief over his father's death is alien and unwelcome.

After the King and Queen leave the stage, it is to his mother's lack of sympathy not only for him but for her dead husband that Hamlet turns in particular pain [in I. ii. 129ff.]. . . . This is an exceptionally suggestive speech and the first of many which seem to invite Oedipal interpretations of the play. About these I do not propose to speak directly, except to remark that the source of Hamlet's so-called Oedipal anxiety is real and present, it is not an archaic and repressed fantasy. Hamlet does perhaps protest too much, in this soliloquy and elsewhere, about his father's superiority to his uncle (and to himself), and throughout the play he is clearly preoccupied with his mother's sexual appetite; but these ambivalences and preoccupations, whatever their unconscious roots, are elicited by a situation, palpable and external to him, in which they are acted out. The Oedipal configurations of Hamlet's predicament, in other words, inhabit the whole world of the play, they are not simply a function of his characterization, even though they resonate with it profoundly. There is every reason, in reality, for a son to be troubled and decomposed by the appetite of a mother who betrays his father's memory by her incestuous marriage, within a month, to his brother, and murderer, and there is surely more than reason for a son to be obsessed for a time with a father who literally returns from the grave to haunt him. But in any case, I think that at least, early in the play, if not later, such Oedipal echoes cannot be disentangled from Hamlet's grief, and Shakespeare's purpose in arousing them is not to call Hamlet's character to judgment, but to expand our understanding of the nature and intensity of his suffering. For all of these resonant events come upon Hamlet while he has still not even begun to assimilate the loss of a living father, while he is still freshly mourning, seemingly alone in Denmark, for the death of a King, and their major psychic impact and importance, I think, is that they protract and vastly dilate the process of his grief. (pp. 18-22)

As I have already suggested, in his first speech to his mother, "Seems, madam! Nay, it is; I know not seems" [I. ii. 76], Hamlet speaks from the very heart of grief of the supervening reality of his loss and of its inward wound, and I think the accent of normal, if intense, grief remains dominant in his subsequent soliloquy as well. It is true that in that soliloquy his mind turns to thoughts of "self-slaughter," but those thoughts notwithstanding, the emphasis of the speech is not one of self-reproach. It is not himself, but the uses of the world which Hamlet finds "weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable" [I. ii. 133], and his mother's frailty suggests a rankness and grossness in nature itself. The "plaints" against his mother which occupy the majority of this speech are conscious and both his anger and ambivalence towards her fully justified. Even on the face of it, her hasty remarriage makes a mockery of his father's memory that intensifies the real pain and loneliness of his loss; and if he also feels his own ego threatened, and if there is a deeper cadence of grief in his words, it is because he is already beginning to sense that the shadow of a crime "with the primal eldest curse upon't" [III. ill. 37] has fallen upon him, a crime which is not delusional and not his, and which eventually inflicts a punishment upon him which tries his spirit and destroys his life. The last lines of Hamlet's soliloquy are:

It is not, nor it cannot come to good.
But break, my heart, for I must hold my tongue.
[I. ii. 158-59]

These lines show Hamlet's prescience, not his disease, and the instant he completes them, Horatio, Marcellus and Barnard enter to tell him of the apparition of his dead father, the ghost which is haunting the kingdom and which has been a part of our own consciousness from the very outset of the play.
Hamlet's subsequent meeting with the ghost of his father is, it seems to me, both the structural and psychic nexus of the play. The scene is so familiar to us that the extraordinary nature of its impact on Hamlet can be overlooked, even in the theater. The whole scene deserves quotation, but I will concentrate upon only the last part of it. The scene begins with Hamlet expressing pity for the ghost and the ghost insisting that he attend to a more "serious" purpose:

_Ghost._ List list, O, list!
If thou didst ever thy dear father love—
_Ham._ O God!
_Ghost._ Revenge his foul and most unnatural murder.

[I. v. 22-5]

The ghost then confirms to Hamlet's prophetic soul that "The serpent that did sting thy father's life / Now wears his crown" [I. v. 39], and he proceeds to describe both Gertrude's remarriage and his own murder in his orchard in terms that seem deliberately to evoke echoes of the serpent in the garden of Eden. The ghost ends his recital saying:

O, horrible! O, horrible! most horrible!
If thou hast nature in thee, bear it not;
Let not the royal bed of Denmark be
A couch for luxury and damned incest.
But, howsoever thou pursuest this act,
Taint not thy mind, nor let thy soul contrive
Against thy mother aught; leave her to heaven,
And to those thorns that in her bosom lodge
To prick and sting her. Fare thee well at once.
The glowworm shows the matin to be near,
And gins to pale his uneffectual fire.
Adieu, adieu, adieu! Remember me. [Exit]

[I. v. 80-91]

Hamlet's answering speech, as the ghost exits, is profound, and it predicates the state of his mind and feeling until the beginning of the last act of the play:

O all you host of heaven! O earth! What else?
And shall I couple hell? O, fie! Hold, hold, my heart;
And you, my sinews, grow not instant old,
But bear me stiffly up. Remember thee!
Ay, thou poor ghost, whiles memory holds a seat
In this distracted globe. Remember thee!
Yea, from the table of my memory
I'll wipe away all trivial fond records,
All saws of books, all forms, all pressures past,
That youth and observation copied there,
And thy commandment all alone shall live
Within the book and volume of my brain,
Unmix'd with baser matter. Yes, by heaven!
O most pernicious woman!
O villain, villain, smiling, damned villain!
My tables—meet it is I set it down
That one may smile, and smile, and be a villain;
At least I am sure it may be so in Denmark.

[Writing.]

So, uncle, there you are. Now to my word:
It is 'Adieu, adieu! Remember me'.
I have sworn't.

[I. v. 92-112]

This is a crucial and dreadful vow for many reasons, but the most important . . . is that the ghost's injunction to remember him, an injunction which Shakespeare's commitment to the whole force of the revenge genre never really permits either us or Hamlet to question, brutally intensifies Hamlet's mourning and makes him incorporate in its work what we would normally regard as the pathology of depression. For . . . the essence of the work of mourning is the internal process by which the ego [the organized conscious self] heals its wound, differentiates itself from the object, and slowly, bit by bit, cuts its libidinal [emotional energy tied to primitive biological urges] ties with the one who has died. Yet this is precisely what the ghost forbids, and forbids, moreover, with a lack of sympathy for Hamlet's grief which is even more pronounced than the Queen's. He instead tells Hamlet that if ever he loved his father, he should remember him; he tells Hamlet of Gertrude's incestuous remarriage in a way which makes her desire, if not the libido itself, seem inseparable from murder and death; and finally he tells Hamlet to kill. Drawing upon and crystallizing the deepest energies of the revenge play genre, the ghost thus enjoins Hamlet to identify with him in his sorrow and to give murderous purpose to his anger. He consciously compels in Hamlet, in other words, the regressive movement towards identification and sadism which together usually constitute the unconscious dynamics of depression. It is only after this scene that Hamlet feels punished with what he later calls "a sore distraction" [V. ii. 230] and that he begins to reproach himself for his own nature and to meditate on suicide. The ghost, moreover, not only compels this process in Hamlet, like much of the world of the play, he incarnates it. The effect of his appearance and behest to Hamlet is to literalize Hamlet's subsequent movement toward the realm of death which he inhabits, and away from all of the libidinal ties which nourish life and make it desirable, away from "all trivial fond records, / All saws of books, all forms, all pressures past" [I. v. 99-100] As C. S. Lewis insisted long ago [in his "Hamlet: The Prince or the Poem," Proceedings of the British Academy, 28 (1942)], the ghost leads Hamlet into a spiritual and psychic region which seems poised between the living and the dead. It is significant that Hamlet is subsequently described in images that suggest the ghost's countenance and significant too, as we shall see later, that Hamlet's own appearance and state of mind change, at the beginning of Act V, at the moment when it is possible to say that he has finally come to terms with the ghost and with his father's death and has completed the work of mourning.

I think Shakespeare intends us always to retain a sense of intensified mourning rather than of disease in Hamlet, partly because Hamlet is always conscious of the manic roles he plays and is always lucid with Horatio, but also because his thoughts and feelings turn outward as well as inward and his behavior is finally a symbiotic response to the actually diseased world of the play. And though that diseased world, poisoned at the root by a truly guilty King, eventually represents an overwhelming tangle of guilt, its main emphasis, both for Hamlet and for us, is the experience of grief. The essential focus of the action as well as the source of its consistent pulsations of feeling, the pulsations which continuously charge both Hamlet's sorrow and his anger (and in which the whole issue of delay is subsumed) is the actuality of conscious, not unconscious loss. For in addition to the death of his father in this play, Hamlet suffers the loss amounting to death of all those persons, except Horatio, whom he has most loved and who have most animated and given meaning to his life. He loses his mother, he loses Ophelia, and he loses his friends; and we can have no question that these losses are real and inescapable.

The loss of his mother is the most intense and the hardest to discuss. One should perhaps leave her to heaven as the ghost says, but even he cannot follow that advice. As I have already suggested, Hamlet is genuinely betrayed by her. She betrays him most directly, I think, by her lack of sympathy for him. She is clearly sexually drawn and loyal to her new husband, and she is said to live almost by Hamlet's looks, but she is
essentially inert, oblivious to the whole realm of human experience through which her son travels. She seems not to care, and seems particularly not to care about his grief. Early in the play, when Claudius and others are in hectic search of the reason for Hamlet's melancholy, she says with bovine imperturbability, "I doubt it is no other but the main, / His father's death and our o'erhasty marriage" [II. ii. 56-7]. That o'erhasty and incestuous marriage, of course, creates a reservoir of literally grievous anger in Hamlet. It suggests to him the impermanence upon which the Player King later insists, the impermanence of human affection as well as of life, and it also, less obviously, compels him to think of the violation of the union which gave him his own life and being. It is very difficult, in any circumstance, to think precisely upon our parents and their relationship without causing deep tremors in our selves, and for Hamlet the circumstances are extraordinary. In additional marriage itself has a sacramental meaning to him which has been largely lost to modern sensibility. Like the ghost, Hamlet always speaks reverently of the sanctity of marital vows, and the one occasion on which he mocks marriage is in fact an attack upon Claudius's presumption to have replaced his father. As he is leaving for England, Hamlet addresses Claudius and says, "Farewell, dear Mother." Claudius says, "Thy loving father, Hamlet," and Hamlet answers, "My mother: father and mother is man and wife; man and wife is one flesh; and so, my mother" [IV. iii. 51-2]. Behind the scriptural image in this ferocious attack upon Claudius, it seems to me, is both Hamlet's memory of his father's true marriage with his mother, a memory which has an almost pre-lapsarian resonance, and a visualization of the concupiscence through which his mother has defiled that sacrament and made Claudius's guilt a part of her own being. This same adulterated image of matrimony, I think, lies behind his intense reproaches both against himself and Ophelia in the speech in which he urges Ophelia to go to a nunnery:

Get thee to a nunnery. Why wouldst thou be a breeder of sinners? I am myself indifferent honest, but yet I could accuse me of such things that it were better my mother had not borne me: I am very proud, revengeful, ambitious; with more offences at my beck than I have thoughts to put them in, imagination to give them shape, or time to act them in. What should such fellows as I do crawling between earth and heaven? [III. i. 120-28]

Some of Hamlet's anger against Ophelia spills over, as it does in this speech, from his rage against his mother, but Ophelia herself gives him cause. I don't think there is any reason to doubt her own word, at the beginning of the play, that Hamlet has importuned her "with love / In honourable fashion . . . And hath given countenance to his speech . . . With almost all the holy vows of heaven" [I. iii. 110-14]; and there is certainly no reason to question his own passionate declaration at the end of the play, over her grave, that he loved her deeply.

I loved Ophelia: forty thousand brothers
Could not, with all their quantity of love,
Make up my sum.
[V. i. 269-71]

Both Hamlet's grief and his task constrain him from realizing this love, but Ophelia's own behavior clearly intensifies his frustration and anguish. By keeping the worldly and disbelieving advice of her brother and father as "watchman" to her "heart" [I. iii. 46], she denies the heart's affection not only in Hamlet but in herself; and both denials add immeasurably to Hamlet's sense of loneliness and loss—and anger. Her rejection of him echoes his mother's inconstancy and denies him the possibility even of imagining the experience of loving and being loved by a woman at a time when he obviously needs such love most profoundly; and her rejection of her own heart reminds him of the evil court whose shadow, he accurately senses, has fallen upon her and directly threatens him. Most of Hamlet's speeches to Ophelia condense all of these feelings. They are spoken from a sense of suppressed as well as rejected love, for the ligaments between him and Ophelia are very deep in the play. It is she who first reports on his melancholy transformation, "with a look so piteous in purport / As if he had been loosed out of hell / To speak of horrors" [II. i. 79-81]; it is she who remains most
acutely conscious of the nobility of mind and form which has, she says, been "blasted with ecstasy" [III. i. 160]; and it is she, after Hamlet has gone to England, who most painfully takes up his role and absorbs his grief to the point of real madness and suicide.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are less close to Hamlet's heart, and because they are such unequivocal sponges of the King, he can release his anger against them without any ambivalence, but at least initially they too amplify both his and our sense of the increasing emptiness of his world. We are so accustomed to treating Rosencrantz and Guildenstern as vaguely comic twins that we can forget the great warmth with which Hamlet first welcomes them to Denmark and the urgency and openness of his plea for the continuation of their friendship. "I will not sort you with the rest of my servants," he tells them,

for, to speak to you like an honest man, I am most dreadfully attended. But, in the beaten way of friendship, what make you at Elsinore?
Ros. To visit you, my lord; no other occasion.
Ham. Beggar that I am, I am even poor in thanks; but I thank you; and sure, dear friends, my thanks are too dear a half-penny. Were you not sent for? Is it your own inclining? Is it a free visitation? Come, come, deal justly with me. Come, come; nay, speak.
Guil. What should we say, my lord?
Ham. Why any thing. But to th'purpose: you were sent for; and there is a kind of confession in your looks, which your modesties have not craft enough to colour; I know the good King and Queen have sent for you.
Ros. To what end, my lord?
Ham. That you must teach me. But let me conjure you by the rights of our fellowship, by the consonancy of our youth, by the obligation of our ever-preserved love, and by what more dear a better proposer can charge you withal, be even and direct with me, whether you were sent for or no?
[II. ii. 267-88]

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, of course, cannot be direct with him, and Hamlet cuts his losses with them quite quickly and eventually quite savagely. But it is perhaps no accident that immediately following this exchange, when he must be fully realizing the extent to which, except for Horatio, he is now utterly alone in Denmark with his grief and his task, he gives that grief a voice which includes in its deep sadness and its sympathetic imagination a conspectus of Renaissance thought about the human condition. (pp. 24-31)

At the beginning of Act V, when Hamlet returns from England, that world seems to change, and Hamlet with it. Neither the countenance of the ghost nor his tormented and tormenting spirit seem any longer to be present in the play, and Hamlet begins to alter in state of mind as he already has in his dress. He stands in the graveyard which visually epitomizes the play's preoccupation with death, a scene which the clowns insistently associate with Adam's sin and Hamlet himself with Cain's, and he contemplates the "chap-fall'n" skull of the man who carried him on his back when he was a small child. His mood, like the scene, is essentially sombre, but though there is a suggestion by Horatio that he is still considering death "too curiously" [V. i. 205], there is no longer the sense that he and his world are conflated in the convulsive activity of grief. That activity seems to be drawing to a close, and his own sense of differentiation is decisively crystallized when, in a scene reminiscent of the one in which he reacts to the imitation of Hecuba's grief, he responds to Laertes's enactment of a grief which seems a parody of his own:

What is he whose grief
Bears such an emphasis, whose phrase of sorrow
Conjures the wand'ring stars, and makes them stand
Like wonder-wounded hearers. This is I,
Hamlet the Dane.
It is an especially painful but inescapable paradox of Hamlet's tragedy that the final ending of his grief and the liberation of his self would be co-extensive with the apprehension of his own death. After agreeing to the duel with Laertes that he is confident of winning, he nevertheless tells Horatio, "But thou wouldst not think how ill all's here about my heart; but it is no matter" [V. ii. 212-13]; and when Horatio urges him to postpone the duel, he says, in the famous speech which signifies, if it does not explain, the decisive change of his spirit:

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 owes of aught he leaves, what is't to leave betimes? Let be.

The theological import of these lines, with their luminous reference to Matthew, has long been recognized, but the particular emphasis upon death also suggests a psychological coordinate. For it seems to me that what makes Hamlet's acceptance of Providence finally intelligible and credible to us emotionally, what confirms the truth of it to our own experience, is our sense, as well as his, that the great anguish and struggle of his grief is over, and that he has completed the work of mourning. He speaks to Horatio quietly, almost serenely, with the unexultant calm which characterizes the end of the long, inner struggle of grief. He has looked at the face of death in his father's ghost, he has endured death and loss in all the human beings he has loved, and he now accepts those losses as an inevitable part of his own condition. He recognizes and accepts his own death. "The readiness is all" suggests the crystallization of his awareness of the larger dimension of time which has enveloped his tragedy from the start, including the revenge drama of Fortinbras's grievances on the outskirts of the action and that of the appalling griefs of Polonius's family deep inside it, but the line also most specifically states what is perhaps the last and most difficult task of mourning, his own readiness to die. (pp. 31-3)

Hamlet is an immensely complicated tragedy, and anything one says about it leaves one haunted by what has not been said. But precisely in a play whose suggestiveness has no end, it seems to me especially important to remember what actually happens. Hamlet himself is sometimes most preoccupied with delay, and with the whole attendant metaphysical issue of the relation between thought and action, but as his own experience shows, there is finally no action that can be commensurate with his grief, not even the killing of a guilty King, and it is Hamlet's experience of grief, and his recovery from it, to which we ourselves respond most deeply. He is a young man who comes home from his university to find his father dead and his mother remarried to his father's murderer. Subsequently the woman he loves rejects him, he is betrayed by his friends, and finally and most painfully, he is betrayed by a mother whose mutability seems to strike at the heart of human affection. In the midst of these waves of losses, which seem themselves to correspond to the spasms of grief, he is visited by the ghost of his father, who places upon him a proof of love and a task of vengeance which he cannot refuse without denying his own being. The ghost draws upon the emotional taproot of the revenge play genre and dilates the natural sorrow and anger of Hamlet's multiple griefs until they include all human frailty in their protest and sympathy and touch upon the deepest synapses of grief in our own lives, not only for those who have died, but for those, like ourselves, who are still alive. (p. 35)


**Criticism: Imagery in Hamlet**

Richard D. Altick
Altick argues that Shakespeare not only emphasized the theme of bodily corruption in Hamlet, but also the "revolting odors that accompany the process." The critic then provides an analysis of various elements of the play, focusing on such images of decay as the sun as an agent of corruption, cancerous infection, and the stench which accompanies rotting. This stench, Altick observes, represents the cunning and lecherousness of Claudius's evil which has corrupted the whole kingdom of Denmark. According to the critic, these and other image patterns demonstrate that "the text reeks with terms symbolic of the loathsomeness of moral disintegration." Altick also discusses the olfactory (relating to the sense of smell) connotations of such key words as "foul," "rank," and "offence," and examines instances of punning (a kind of wordplay which manipulates the use of two words with different meanings based on their similarity of sound) between the terms "offence" and "offend."

In writing Hamlet, Shakespeare was preoccupied with the corruption of mortal flesh. From the famous first statement of the idea in Marcellus' "Something is rotten in the state of Denmark" [I. iv. 90] to Hamlet's discourse with the Gravediggers on the lamentable condition of the bodies they disinter, the reader of the play may never long forget that after death the human body putrifies. To Shakespeare's contemporaries, of course, the idea was the most familiar of commonplaces, the center of a cluster of time-worn platitudes which, by making pious capital of a universal biological process, reminded man that flesh was foul and that even a king could go a progress through the guts of a beggar. It was a commonplace, but much more. Every Elizabethan citizen knew from personal observation the reek of a gangrenous wound or a cancerous sore. Thus the fact that human flesh may well begin to rot even before death, and that the process is accelerated and even more loathsome afterwards—witness the stench of unburied "pocky corpses" in plague time and of bones being transferred to the charnel house after their sojourn in hallowed ground—was removed from the abstract realm of folk-say and sermon, and made immediate and unforgettable by the nauseating testimony of the nostrils.

The ancient moral therefore was constantly and repellently illustrated in the everyday life of Shakespeare's time. In his plays generally, Shakespeare habitually uses allusions to the rotting of flesh as a vivid way of symbolizing repugnant ideas. In Hamlet, however, he not only lays heavier emphasis than in any other play upon bodily corruption, but stresses, to a degree found nowhere else, the revolting odors that accompany the process. The play indeed may justly be said to be enveloped in an atmosphere of stench. The stink that rises from dead flesh emblemizes the sheer loathsomeness of the sort of evil, cunning and lecherous, with which Claudius has corrupted the whole kingdom; the fact that once begun, the process of rotting gains inexorable headway and the odor it generates spreads far and wide, suggests the dynamic and infectious quality of sin; and the further fact that the process transforms the beautiful human body into a horrid, malodorous mass of corruption is symbolic of the dread effect of sin upon the human soul. It is not only to Hamlet that, as G. Wilson Knight has remarked, "the universe smells of mortality"; all the leading characters manifest, through their choice of language, their awareness of the odor, originating in the foul soul of Claudius, that permeates the kingdom.

Since the detailed work of Caroline Spurgeon and Wolfgang Clemen especially, no student of Hamlet has been unaware of the way in which images of corrupting disease dominate the poetic fabric of the play. But the importance of the accompanying suggestion of nauseating smell has not, I think, been generally appreciated. It is not a matter of images alone—images represent simply the points at which the hovering theme is made explicit by embodiment in a metaphor—but also of the many single related words scattered through the text whose sensory suggestion, dormant now as it was not in Shakespeare's time, is overlooked unless the chief image-motif is constantly recalled.

The opening scene has long been admired as a masterpiece of atmospheric writing. Francisco's line in the first minute of the play, "'Tis bitter cold, / And I am sick at heart" [I. i. 8-9], not only defines the foreboding, uneasy atmosphere of the setting, but, by associating the idea of sickness with an as yet unknown evil, initiates the use of a word which from time to time will reinforce the play's dominant image. Before the end of the scene sick appears in a new context:
the moist star
Upon whose influence Neptune's empire stands
Was sick almost to doomsday with eclipse
[I. i. 118-20]

—and by the recurrence of the word in such an image we are led to feel that the disturbance in the common
cold soldier's heart is simply a reflection, in microcosm, of the vast upset which is visiting Elsinore now as it did
the state of Rome a little ere the mightiest Julius fell. (Brutus, it will be recalled, had "some sick offence"
[Julius Caesar, II. i. 268] within his mind the very night that the ominous portents visited Rome.) The
association between sickness and night, thus formed, is further defined when Marcellus, in one of the few
lyrical passages of the play, speaks of the happy Christmas season when "the nights are wholesome" [I. i.
162], and thus makes clear that in Elsinore, at the present moment, the nights are not wholesome. The
Elizabethans, of course, feared the night air as the carrier of contagion, especially from the putrescent matter
in marshes and churchyards. Thus this early allusion to the unwholesomeness of the Elsinore nights begins the
process, to be continued throughout the play, of appealing to the medical, the epidemiological lore of the
contemporary playgoer.

This heretofore general sense of sickness is localized and given specific connection with physical decay in the
second line Hamlet utters. In response to the King's question, "How is it that the clouds still hang on you?"
Hamlet says, "Not so, my lord. I am too much i' th' sun" [I. ii. 66-7]. The usual interpretation of the line (a
quibble on son and sun—I am too conscious of my character as son, and I am uncomfortable in the presence
of the King, the sun) does not convey the entire meaning. Claudius is the sun, of course; but what is often
overlooked is that the sun is a powerful agent of corruption. Since Hamlet does not yet recognize the King's
vast influence for evil, the line is ironical; only looking back, especially from the point where Hamlet
envisions the sun breeding maggots in a dead dog, do we realize that he is characterizing the King more truly
than he can, at this point, know. Like the sun, particularly in time of plague, the King can spread corruption
wherever his influence falls, and Hamlet is exposed to the full glare of that malign power. The idea contained
in the line is resumed in "O that this too too solid flesh would melt, / Thaw, and resolve itself into a dew!" [I.
ii. 129-30]. Hamlet wishes that the physical disintegration which the sun promotes would be his own
immediate fortune. (A simpler, and equally plausible, explanation which still connects the two separate
passages would be in terms of the sun as the melter, not of flesh, but of snow. But the "god kissing carrion"
image later on [II. ii. 182], which picks up the "too much i' th' sun" notion again, inclines me to the former
interpretation.) The rest of Hamlet's speech, contrasting with the high sentences of the King's address to him,
is necked with base images of decay (the world is overgrown by "things rank and gross in nature" [I.ii.
136]—rank in two senses) and of parasitism, which is often linked with decay (the Queen had clung to the
elder Hamlet "As if increase of appetite had grown / By what it fed on" [I. ii. 144-45]). There may even be a
double pun in "How weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable / Seem to me all the uses of this world!" [I. ii. 133-34].
To an Elizabethan auditor, the obvious meaning of the word stale in context, "musty," would have chimed
with a second meaning, "prostitute"—appropriate enough in the light of what Hamlet proceeds to say about
his mother—and even with a third, "horse's urine," which would add a certain measure to the malodorousness
of the whole text and detract nothing from the auditor's appreciation of the hopelessness of Hamlet's outlook.

The concluding lines of the scene,

I doubt some foul play. Would the night were come!
Till then sit still, my soul. Foul deeds will rise,
Though all the earth o'erwhelm them, to men's eyes
[I. ii. 255-57]

carry on the association begun in the first scene between night and apparitions, and relate it to the
image-pattern. The allusion is to the way in which decaying animal (or vegetable) matter, though deeply
buried, seems to rise again at night in miasmatic mists or phosphorescent glows, or in phantasmic shapes which old superstition identified as ghosts. Evil, Hamlet's image says, may be put out of sight, but it will return, in some new manifestation which will affront not only the eyes but—the force of foul is clear—the nose. It may be no accident that in the first minute of the next scene, which followed without pause on the Elizabethan stage, Shakespeare has Laertes speak of violets and perfume; an effective contrast to the repeated foul of Hamlet's last lines.

At this point, there enters a second corruption image, which shifts attention from the putrescence of a dead organism to that in a still living one. Laertes' image "The canker galls the infants of the spring / Too oft before their buttons be disclos'd" [I. iii. 39-40], is usually, and rightly, read as referring to the action of a caterpillar, in young buds. But the other, equally common, meaning of canker—cancer—is likely to have occurred as well to the hearers of the lines. In the next scene the idea of cancerous decay in a living organism recurs, although still only by implication. In his rambling, time-filling discourse to Horatio and Marcellus as they await the Ghost, Hamlet dwells upon the "vicious mole of nature" (some particular shortcoming) in certain men which leads them "in the general censure [to] take corruption" [I. iv. 24-35]—i.e., to be condemned for that single fault. The image, although interrupted and blurred by Hamlet's nervous loquacity, is plainly suggestive of a spreading cancer (the "vicious" makes it plain that he is not thinking of an ordinary mole or skin blemish), which leads to total infection. The cancerous nature of evil is about to be illustrated by the Ghost's narrative. "Something is rotten in the state of Denmark" [I. iv. 90], says Marcellus as he watches the Ghost lead Hamlet off.

The Ghost tells his story to Hamlet in language dominated by a sense of rottenness, disease, and stench. He is "confin'd to fast in fires," he says, "Til the foul crimes done in my days of nature / Are burnt and purg'd away" [I. v. 11-13]. The word foul, given no less prominence than the key-word murther, reverberates in his solemn lines, which are among the most dramatic in all the play:

    Ghost. Revenge his foul and most unnatural murder.
    Hamlet. Murder?
    Ghost. Murder most foul, as in the best it is;
      But this most foul strange, and unnatural.
    [I. v. 25-8]

"The fat weed / That rots itself in ease on Lethe wharf," spoken of in the lines just following [I. v. 32-3], continue the idea of foulness; as [George Lyman] Kittredge notes, "the very existence of a slimy water-weed seems to be decay; it thrives in corruption and 'rots itself' through its lazy, stagnant life." The ear of Denmark is "rankly abused." Lust, says the Ghost, now for the first time applying the idea of repulsive odor to the sexual sin of Claudius and Gertrude,

            though to a radiant angel link'd,
            Will sate itself in a celestial bed
            And prey on garbage
    [I. v. 55-7]

—the olfactory suggestion of which is made explicit by the contrast provided by the very next line: "But soft! Methinks I scent the morning air" [I. v. 58]. Rather ironically, considering the state of his own mind, as manifested in his language, the Ghost commands Hamlet, "Taint not thy mind" [I. v. 85]. But by this time evil has as vile a smell to Hamlet as it does to his father; and, being Hamlet, he reveals it by the wild and whirling play on offend/offence, to which we shall return presently.

Even in the succeeding scene, involving Polonius, Reynaldo, and Ophelia, though the subject-matter has no relation to what has just preceded, the suggestion of vile smell is not entirely absent. Polonius directs
Reynaldo to take care not to set afloat any rumors about Laertes that are "so rank / As may dishonour him" but rather to "breathe his faults so quaintly / That they may seem the taints of liberty" (II. i. 20-1, 31-2). But it is only when Hamlet is seen again that the evil-smell theme is signally resumed. Hamlet identifies Polonius as a fishmonger, a term which, in addition to other appropriate aspects that have been pointed out by the commentators, has its own odorous value. And then he reads in his book: "For if the sun breed maggots in a dead dog, being a god kissing carrion—Have you a daughter?" he suddenly asks. "Let her not walk i' th' sun. Conception is a blessing, but not as your daughter may conceive" [II. ii. 181-85]. And here we have a recurrence of the image already noted in the second scene of the play: Claudius as the sun, and the sun as an agent of noisome corruption, which, according to the pseudo-science of the time, resulted in turn in the breeding of new life. Hamlet is now fully conscious of the evil influence of the King, and he warns that Ophelia too is endangered by the same corruptive force which he had, albeit unconsciously, identified in his "I am too much i' th' sun"—though Ophelia, as a woman, is imperilled in a different way. Hamlet, his father, Gertrude, and now (Hamlet fears) Ophelia: the roll of the King's victims is increasing; the evil generated by Claudius' sick soul is spreading insidiously through the court. No wonder, then, that to Hamlet the air "appeareth no other thing . . . than a foul and pestilent congregation of vapours" III. ii. 302-03: vapors spreading the evil of a dead crime far and wide. "What a piece of work is a man" [II. ii. 303] indeed—a man whose sin has the power so to infect a whole kingdom. A far cry, this Hamlet whose "imaginations are as foul / As Vulcan's stithy" [III. ii. 83-4]—any Elizabethan's nostrils would have quivered, as ours may not, to the suggestion of thick smoke and the reek of seared horses' hoofs—from the young man who once was accustomed to utter to Ophelia "words of so sweet breath compos'd" [III. i. 97]. Where now is the perfume of his former discourse?

The hovering suggestions of physical contagion in the night air, which had been lost since the Ghost scene, are brought to a new focus in Lucianus' concluding incantation in the play-within-a-play:

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Thou mixture rank, of midnight weeds collected,
   With Hecate's ban thrice blasted, thrice infected,
Thy natural magic and dire property
   On wholesome life usurp immediately.
[III. ii. 257-60]
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_Rank, midnight, blasted, infected_ have powerful connotations of physical evil, especially as contrasted with _wholesome_. And the connection of these midnight horrors with the stench of putrifying flesh is made specific in Hamlet's speech at the close of the scene:

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'Tis now the very witching time of night,
   When churchyards yawn, and hell itself breathes out
Contagion to this world.
[III. ii. 388-90]
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The following scenes (III. iii-iv) have the highest incidence of corruption-smell images and puns in the play, which is but natural when we recall that these scenes are the direct, if delayed, sequel to the odor-laden interview with the Ghost. The King's speech beginning "O, my offence is rank, it smells to heaven" [III. iii. 36], with its repeated use of words like _offence, strong, foul, and corrupted_, sets the tone of all that follows. Hamlet refers to Claudius as "a mildew'd ear / Blasting his wholesome brother" [III. iv. 64-5], _mildew'd_ providing a clear image of bad-smelling fungi communicating infection to a hitherto healthy organism. The Queen envisions her soul as full of "such black and grained spots / As will not leave their tinct" [III. iv. 90-1], a phrase suggestive of cancerous or other corruptive growth. And, resuming the very imagery which the Ghost had used to describe the incest, Hamlet bursts out:
Nay, but to live
In the rank sweat of an enseamed bed,
Stew'd in corruption, honeying and making love
Over the nasty sty!
[III. iv. 91-4]

"Mother, for love of grace," he continues after the reappearance of the Ghost,

Lay not that flattering unction to your soul,
That not your trespass but my madness speaks.
It will but skin and film the ulcerous place,
Whiles rank corruption, mining all within,
Infests unseen
[III. iv. 144-49]

—a deservedly admired image of the insidious action of a cancer in or near the skin, the stench of which is made unmistakably vivid by "rank corruption." Finally, Hamlet begs the Queen henceforth to avoid the "reechy kisses" of her lecherous husband. In Hamlet's mind the evil of the Queen's incest is firmly symbolized by a noisome smell; the marriage bed is associated with garbage and the nasty sty; and her sense of guilt is a cancerous sore whose spread cannot be arrested by any rationalization.

In the following scene (IV.i), by a nice stroke of irony, Claudius picks up the same image of cancer and applies it, in the presence of the Queen, to Hamlet's affliction:

so much was our love
We would not understand what was most fit,
But, like the owner of a foul disease,
To keep it from divulging, let it feed
Even on the pith of life.
[IV. i. 19-23]

"Diseases desperate grown," he decides after an interval—anticipating Hamlet's own conclusion following his return from England—"By desperate appliance are reliev'd, / Or not at all" [IV. iii. 9-11]. Hamlet does nothing to alleviate the morbidity of Claudius' mind when he proceeds to lecture him on the manner in which we mortal men "fat ourselves for maggots," and to assure him that, if Polonius' corpse is not meanwhile discovered, "you shall nose him as you go up the stairs into the lobby" [IV. iii. 22-3, 36-7].

Except for small reminders in the scene between Claudius and Laertes (allusions to plague, sickness, pleurisy [excess], the quick o' the ulcer, and a gangrenous sore arising from the scratch of a poisoned sword), the corruption-smell theme lapses until the graveyard scene, when, in a sense, it reaches its climax. The significance of this scene in terms of the motif we have been tracing lies not so much in the actual lines—although the Gravedigger's instructive remarks on the number of years required for a corpse to rot after the laying-in, and Hamlet's subsequent exclamation of disgust upon smelling Yorick's skull are parts of the pattern—as in the abundant suggestions which the man's mortality, the place where flesh, whose corruption may have begun in life, was laid in earth—and where flesh continued to rot after death, its fetid exhalations assaulting men's noses and not merely making their gorges rise but warning them of the danger of fatal contagion. All the preceding imagery and word-play dealing with the odor of mortality have pointed toward this scene; and after the scene is ended, the motif is heard but once more, in Hamlet's simple query to Horatio:

And is't not to be damn'd
To let this canker of our nature come
In further evil?
In this tracing of the various forms which imagery suggestive of corruption and evil odor takes in *Hamlet*, we have not noticed the occurrence of dozens of detached words which support the dominant motif. Read in their immediate context, they usually seem colorless, with little metaphorical force; but read against the whole atmospheric pattern as we have just outlined it, they are revealed to have an indispensable relation to it. The text reeks with terms symbolic of the loathsomeness of moral disintegration.

The pervasiveness of the idea of the odor of disease in the play is due no more to the formal metaphors which incorporate it than to the simple recurrence of the words *sick* (*sickly, sicklied*) and *disease*, even when these do not in their context refer to physical illness. (Indeed, there is no actual bodily sickness in the play, unless it is the rather ambiguous malady of the Player King.) To the Elizabethans, in days long before asepsis had robbed illness of some of its malodorousness, *sick* and *diseased* probably had a specific sensory association which is now largely lost. The often-noted emphasis on these words in the play is not designed to convey the idea of an unhealthy state of mind, of moral degeneration, alone; the words contribute their share to the general effect of physical smell which in the images is so strongly associated with disease.

In our time *foul* has lost most of its power of sensory suggestion. It had begun to do so in Shakespeare's time, and we may doubt whether, on most of the scores of occasions upon which the word is used in his plays, it evoked any sensory reaction in his audience. Normally it was a rather neutral adjective of censure. But at the same time the word did continue to designate the odor generated by decaying flesh, and in appropriate contexts it did retain an unmistakable connotative power, roughly equivalent perhaps to our epithet *stinking*. In *Hamlet* this specific connotation is predominant, as it is nowhere else in the canon, because the word *foul* occurs frequently in conjunction with other words which serve to develop its definite, but normally latent, olfactory reference. Because of this, and because of the presence in the text of so many other passages suggestive of smell, the word, no matter how casually used, has a special significance. It is noteworthy that in two separate passages, both of them quoted above, Shakespeare uses *foul* in rhetorical repetition, as if to make sure that its full connotative value is not lost upon the audience.

The repulsive sensory connotation of *rank* ("corrupt, foul, festering") in some contexts is obscured by another meaning. But by neglecting the possibility of a pun, we fail to realize how this word too supports the prevailing theme. Actually, in several instances, in which the primary meaning is "luxuriant, overgrown," the pun is double: *rank* in the sense of "stinking" and also in the more specialized sense of "in lecherous heat," as in Hamlet's description of Denmark as

> an unweeded garden  
> That grows to seed; things *rank* and gross in nature  
> Possess it merely  
> [I. ii. 135-37]

and his admonition to his mother, "Do not spread the compost on the weeds / To make them *ranker*" [III. iv. 151-52].

Possibly we are on less certain ground when we include *offence* with *foul* and *rank* as a word which recurrently supports the sickness-foul odor theme in *Hamlet*. Yet there is evidence that in Elizabethan times the word was frequently related to olfactory affront; for example, a passage cited in the *New English Dictionary* from Sir John Harington's *Metamorphosis of Ajax* (1596) runs: "They quickly found not only offence but infection to grow out of great concours of people"—*offence* referring most explicitly to the effect upon the nostrils of the sweaty, unwashed, and disease-ridden populace. In Shakespeare's mind there was an unmistakable, though of course not constant, association between *offence/offend* and bad odors. In the plays one can find some fifteen or twenty passages in which one or the other of these words occurs in intimate
proximity to words or images of smell or disease (infected, sick, taint, foul, strong, rank, nose, breathe, corruption, rotten). I am persuaded that the repeated occurrence of offend and offence in Hamlet is part of the pattern of submerged punning. That the words embodied for Shakespeare not only the abstract concept (sin, crime) but also the symbolic sensory manifestation (something disagreeable, disgusting: specifically, a foul odor) seems clear, above all in Claudius' speech in the prayer scene, in the first line of which the connection is made between offence and smell, and in the remainder of which offence, despite the shift in image, is interlaced with other terms suggestive of smell:

O, my offence is rank, it smells to heaven;
It hath the primal eldest curse upon't,
A brother's murther! Pray can I not,
Though inclination be as sharp as will.
My stronger guilt defeats my strong intent,
And, like a man to double business bound,
I stand in pause where I shall first begin,
And both neglect. What if this cursed hand
Were thicker than itself with brother's blood,
Is there not rain enough in the sweet heavens
To wash it white as snow? Whereto serves mercy
But to confront the visage of offence?
And what's in prayer but this twofold force,
To be forestalled ere we come to fall,
Or pardon'd being down? Then I'll look up;
My fault is past. But, O, what form of prayer
Can serve my turn? "Forgive me my foul murder"?
That cannot be; since I am still possess'd
Of those effects for which I did the murther—
My crown, mine own ambition, and my queen.
May one be pardon'd and retain th' offence?
In the corrupted currents of this world
Offence's gilded hand may shove by justice,
And oft 'tis seen the wicked prize itself
Buys out the law; but 'tis not so above.
[III. iii. 36-59]

It is remarkable that this speech, as printed in the first quarto, does not contain a single one of the recurrent quibbling allusions to foul smell; such odorless words as trespass, fault, and sin are used instead. Although most scholarly opinion today holds that the first quarto text is a debased and garbled version of that of the second quarto, and that Shakespeare did not, as was formerly thought, write two separate versions of Hamlet, it is tempting to think that Shakespeare rewrote the speech with the conscious purpose of intensifying the prevalent aura of corruption in the play. (Why, if the text known to the abridger who made the first quarto was substantially that which is printed above, did he systematically omit every offence and every other word suggestive of smell?) Noteworthy too is the fact that, as is twice the case with foul, Shakespeare employs offence recurrently within other brief passages, as if to emphasize its specific connotative significance. As early as the first act, when Marcellus' remark that something is rotten in Denmark and the Ghost's bitter reference to lust preying on garbage are still fresh in our ears, we hear Hamlet apologizing to Horatio for his wild words:

_Hamlet_. I am sorry they offend you, heartily . . .
_Horatio_. There's no offence, my lord.
_Hamlet_. Yes, by Saint Patrick, but there is, Horatio,
And much *offence* too
[I. v. 134-37]

—a passage which amounts to a three-way, or progressive, pun, *offence* having not only the obvious meanings of "irritation" or "affront" (which alone is what Hamlet first intended) and "crime" (which is what he includes in the meaning after Horatio has converted the verb into a noun), but, thirdly, that of "foul odor," the physical emblem of evil. Hamlet gives the same double twist to the word in the mousetrap scene:

  *King.* Have you heard the argument?
  *Is there no offence in't?*
  *Hamlet.* No, no! They do but jest, poison in jest; *no offence i’ th’ world.*
  [III. ii. 232-35]

And two scenes later (the prayer scene, with its own quadruple use of the word, has intervened) Shakespeare gives fresh rhetorical emphasis to the verb:

  *Queen.* Hamlet, thou hast thy father much *offended.*
  *Hamlet.* Mother, you have my father much *offended.*
  [III. iv. 9-10]

—an exchange which sets the tone of the ensuing interview with the Queen, in which Hamlet's utterance abounds with allusions to smell. In no other play does Shakespeare dwell so insistently upon *offend/offence* by having the characters thrust the words back and forth within the compass of a few lines. To me this unusual, conspicuous dwelling upon the words suggests that Shakespeare must have found a significance in them over and above their abstract suggestion of "sin" or "crime." They act as hovering puns, which, once we have recognized them as such, remind us repeatedly of the play's preoccupation with foul smell. Interestingly enough, *offend* appears last of all in the play by virtue of a slip of the Gravedigger's tongue [V. i. 9]. "It must be *se defendendo,*" he should say, referring to the coroner's verdict on Ophelia's drowning; but, by having him blunder into "*se offendendo,*" Shakespeare ekes out one more occasion for the pun.

The degree to which Shakespeare was conscious (if he was conscious at all) of his making repulsive odors as a symbol of moral corruption permeate the text of *Hamlet* can never, of course, be determined. Whatever his mental processes may have been, the fact remains that, in addition to the series of metaphors in which fleshly corruption so often is associated with stench, the play contains dozens of occurrences of words which intensify the dominant scent of foulness—which make the moral evil of Elsinore a stink in our nostrils. To miss them, as Dover Wilson says of Shakespeare's punning habit in general, is "often to miss the interwoven thread which connects together a whole train of images; for imagery and double meaning are generally inseparable."

The sense of evil which permeates the play, therefore, is not created merely, as critics have generally assumed, by the iterated allusions to corruption. It is deepened and made more repulsive by being constantly associated with one of the most unpleasant of man's sensory experiences. Above all, the suggestion of noisome odors reminds us of that aspect of evil which Shakespeare seems most concerned to emphasize in *Hamlet:* the evil residing in the soul of one man cannot be contained there, nor can a single sin be without far-reaching consequences. Insidiously, irresistibly, it spreads into a whole society, just as the reek generated by a mass of putrid flesh bears infection to many who breathe it. In an age when everyday experience made men nauseatingly conscious of the way in which the odor arising from bodily decay cannot be localized, Shakespeare's use of the language of smell must have provided an extraordinarily vivid lesson in the continuous, contagious quality of sin. (pp. 167-76)
Kenneth Muir

[Muir discusses imagery and symbolism in Hamlet, beginning with an examination of what he considers the most apparent image pattern in the play—disease. The critic suggests that images of disease are not associated with Hamlet himself, but a sense of infection surrounds both Claudius's crime and guilt and Gertrude's sin. Muir attributes Hamlet's disorder to his melancholic grief over his father's death and his mother's frailty. In addition, the critic includes images of decay, flowers, and prostitution, with those of disease in the larger patterns of corruption and appearance versus reality. Finally, Muir explores war imagery in Hamlet, noting that it frequently recurs in the text and that its dramatic function is to underscore the fact that Hamlet and Claudius are engaged in a duel to the death.]

A good many of the sickness images are merely designed to lend atmosphere [in Hamlet], as when Francisco on the battlements remarks that he is "sick at heart" [I. i. 9] or when Hamlet speaks of the way the courtier's chilblain is galled by the peasant's. Other images ... are connected with the murder of Hamlet's father or with the corresponding murder of Gonzago. Several of the images refer to the sickness of the state, which some think to be due to the threat of war, but which the audience soon comes to realize is caused by Claudius' unpunished crime. Horatio believes that the appearance of the Ghost "bodes some strange eruption to our state" [I. i. 69] and Marcellus concludes that

Something is rotten in the state of Denmark.
[I. iv. 90]

Hamlet himself uses disease imagery again and again in reference to the King's guilt. He thinks of himself as a surgeon probing a wound: "I'll tent him to the quick" [II. ii. 597]. He tells Guildenstern that Claudius should have sent for a physician rather than himself, and when he refrains from assassinating him he remarks:

This physic but prolongs thy sickly days.
[III. iii. 96]

He compares Claudius to "a mildewed ear Blasting his wholesome brother" [III. iv. 64-5] and in the last scene of the play he compares him to a cancer:

Is't not to be damn'd
To let this canker of our nature come
In further evil.
[V. ii. 68-70]

It is true that Claudius reciprocates by using disease images in reference to Hamlet. He compares his leniency to his nephew to the behaviour of one suffering from a foul disease who conceals it and lets it feed "Even on the pith of life" [IV. i. 23]. He supports his stratagem of sending Hamlet to England with the proverbial maxim:

Diseases desperate grown
By desperate appliance are reliev'd,
Or not at all.
[IV. iii. 9-11]
In hatching his plot with Laertes, he calls Hamlet's return "the quick of th'ulcer" [IV. vii. 123]. It is surely obvious that these images cannot be used to reflect on Hamlet's character: they exhibit rather the King's guilty fear of his nephew.

Some of the disease images are used by Hamlet in reference to the Queen's adultery at which, he tells her, "Heaven's face . . . Is thought-sick" [III. iv. 48-51]. He urges her not to lay to her soul the "flattering unction" that he is mad:

\[
\text{It will but skin and film the ulcerous place,} \\
\text{While rank corruption, mining all within,} \\
\text{Infests unseen.} \\
\text{[III. iv. 147-49]}
\]

Gertrude herself, suffering from pangs of remorse, speaks of her "sick soul".

Laertes uses three disease images, two in his warnings to Ophelia not to allow herself to be seduced by Hamlet since in youth

\[
\text{Contagious blastments are most imminent.} \\
\text{[I. iii. 42]}
\]

In the third he tells Claudius that the prospect of avenging himself "warms the very sickness" [IV. vii. 55] in his heart.

Hamlet uses one image to describe the cause of the war between Norway and Poland—

\[
\text{the imposthume of much wealth and peace} \\
\text{That inward breaks, and shows no cause without} \\
\text{Why the man dies.} \\
\text{[IV. iv. 27-9]}
\]

We have now examined nearly all the disease imagery without finding any evidence to support the view that Hamlet himself is diseased—the thing that is rotten in the state of Denmark. It is rather Claudius' crime and his guilty fears of Hamlet, and Gertrude's sin to which the imagery mainly refers; and in so far as it relates to the state of Denmark it emphasizes that what is wrong with the country is the unpunished fratricide committed by its ruler. But four disease images remain to be considered.

While Hamlet is waiting for his interview with his father's ghost he meditates on the drunkenness of the Court and of the way a single small defect in a man's character destroys his reputation and nullifies his virtues in the eyes of the world—"the general censure" [I. iv. 35]. The dram of evil,—some bad habit, an inherited characteristic, or "some vicious mole of nature"—

\[
\text{Doth all the noble substance of a doubt.} \\
\text{[I. iv. 24-5]}
\]

The line is textually corrupt, but the general meaning of the passage is plain. Some critics, and Sir Laurence Olivier in his film of the play [see Sources for Further Study], have assumed that Hamlet, consciously or unconsciously, was thinking of the tragic flaw in his own character. But there is no reason to think that at this point in the play Hamlet suffers from some vicious mole of nature—he has not yet been tested. In any case he is not arguing that a single defect outweighs infinite virtues, but merely that it spoils a man's reputation. The lines cannot properly be applied to Hamlet himself.
Two more disease images occur in the speech in which Claudius is trying to persuade Laertes to murder Hamlet. He tells him that love is apt to fade,

For goodness, growing to a plurisy
Dies in his own too much: that we would do
We should do when we would.
[IV. vii. 117-19]

If we put it off,

this 'should' is like a spendthrift's sigh
That hurts by easing.
[IV. vii. 122-23]

The speech is designed to persuade Laertes to avenge his father's death without delay. But as Hamlet and Laertes are characters placed in a similar position, and as by this time Hamlet's vengeance has suffered abatements and delays, many critics have suggested that Shakespeare is commenting through the mouth of Claudius on Hamlet's failure to carry out his duty. It is not inherently impossible; but we should surely apply these lines to Hamlet's case only if we find by the use of more direct evidence that Shakespeare so conceived Hamlet's failure to carry out his duty.

Only one sickness image remains to be discussed, but this is the most famous one. In his soliloquy in Act III scene 1 (which begins "To be or not to be" [III. i. 55ff.]) Hamlet shows that thinking about the possible results of action is apt to inhibit it. People refrain from committing suicide (in spite of the miseries of this life) because they fear that death will be worse than life. They may, for example, be punished in hell for violating the canon against self-slaughter. Hamlet continues:

Thus conscience does make cowards of us all,
And thus the native hue of resolution
Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought,
And enterprises of great pitch and moment
With this regard their currents turn awry
And lose the name of action.
[III. i. 82-7]

Obviously these lines are an important clue to the interpretation of the play. I used to think that conscience meant both "thinking too precisely on the event" and also the "craven scruple" of which Hamlet speaks in his last soliloquy—conscience as well as conscience, in fact. I now think the word is used (as in the words "the conscience of the King" [II. ii. 605]) only in its modern sense. Since Hamlet foresees that in taking vengeance on Claudius he may himself be killed, he hesitates—not because he is afraid of dying, but because he is afraid of being punished for his sins in hell or purgatory. But, as G. R. Elliott has pointed out [in his Scourge and Minister], Hamlet is speaking not merely of himself but of every man:

Thus conscience does make cowards of us all.
[III. i. 82]

It is apparent from this analysis of the sickness imagery in the play that it throws light on Elsinore rather than on Hamlet himself. He is not the diseased figure depicted by a long line of critics—or, at least, the imagery cannot justifiably be used in support of such an interpretation. On the other hand, the parallels which have been pointed out with Timothy Bright's Treatise of Melancholy do suggest that Shakespeare conceived his hero as suffering from melancholy. As depicted in the course of the play, he is not the paragon described by
Ophelia, the observer of all observers, the glass of fashion,

The expectancy and rose of the fair state.
[III. i. 152]

But it is necessary to emphasize that his melancholy has objective causes in the frailty of his mother and the
death of his father.

Closely connected with the sickness imagery is what may loosely be called symbolism concerned with the
odour of corruption. . . . Hamlet, like Webster in Eliot's poem, is much possessed by death. He speaks of the
way the sun breeds maggots in a dead dog, he refers to the corpse of Polonius as "the guts"; he tells Claudius
that the dead man is at supper at the diet of worms and he proceeds to show how a king may go a progress
through the guts of a beggar. The Graveyard scene is designed not merely to provide a last expression of
Hamlet's love for Ophelia, and an opportunity for screwing up Laertes' hatred of Hamlet to the sticking-point.
This could have been done without the conversation between the gravediggers, and that between the
gravedigger and Hamlet. The scene is clearly used to underline the death-theme. Hamlet's meditation on the
various skulls serves as a memento mori [a reminder of mortality]. We are reminded of Cain, who did the first
murder, of Lady Worms, "chapless and knocked about the mazard with a sexton's spade" [V. i. 89-90], of
Yorick's stinking skull, and of the noble dust of Alexander which may be stopping a bung-hole. Hamlet is
thinking of the base uses to which we may return; but his meditations in the graveyard, though somewhat
morbid, are calmer and less bitter than his thoughts earlier in the play.

All through the play there are words and images which reinforce the idea of corruption. Hamlet, feeling
himself to be contaminated by the frailty of his mother wishes that his sullied flesh would melt. He suspects
"foul play" when he hears of the appearance of the ghost. The intemperance of the Danes makes foreigners
soil their addition with swinish phrase. Denmark's ear is "rankly abused" by the false account of the death of
Hamlet's father; and later Claudius, at his prayers confesses that his "offence is rank" [III. iii. 36]. The Ghost
tells Hamlet that Lust

Will sate itself in a celestial bed
And prey on garbage.
[I. v. 56-7]

Polonius speaks of his son's youthful vices as "the taints of liberty" [II. i. 32]. The air seems to Hamlet "a foul
and pestilent congregation of vapours" [II. ii. 302-03] and he declares that if his uncle's guilt is not revealed, his

impressions are as foul
As Vulcan's stithy.
[III. ii. 83-4]

In the scene with his mother, Hamlet speaks of "the rank sweat of an enseamed bed"; he urges her not to
"spread the compost on the weeds To make them ranker"; and he speaks of "rank corruption mining all
within". The smell of sin blends with the odour of corruption. [III. iv. 92, 151-52, 148]

The only alleviation to this atmosphere is provided by the flowers associated with the "rose of May" [IV. v.
158], Ophelia. Laertes compares Hamlet's love for her to a violet; Ophelia warns her brother not to tread "the
primrose path of dalliance" [I. ii. 50], and later she laments that the perfume of Hamlet's love is lost. In her
madness she distributes flowers and the last picture we have of her alive is wearing "fantastic garlands".
Laertes prays that violets may spring from her unpolluted flesh and the Queen scatters flowers in the grave
with the words "Sweets to the sweet" [V. i. 243]. Hamlet, probably referring to his love for Ophelia, tells
Gertrude that her adultery

takes off the rose
From the fair forehead of an innocent love
And sets a blister there.
[III. iv. 42-4]

The rose colour again reminds us of the flower. But the flowers and perfumes associated with Ophelia do not seriously counterbalance the odour of corruption.

A smaller group of images concerned with the harlot has several ramifications. In its simplest form, the harlot's cheek, "beautied with plastering art" [III. i. 50], is a symbol of hypocrisy, of the contrast between appearance and reality—the contrast between the King's deed and his "most painted word" [III. i. 52]. In the same scene Hamlet takes up the theme. He implies that, since harlots paint, women who paint, including the "beautified" Ophelia, are harlots. "God hath given you one face, and you make yourselves another" [III. i. 143]. Beauty is itself a snare because

the power of beauty will sooner transform honesty from what it is to a bawd than the force of honesty can translate beauty into his likeness.
[III. i. 110-13]

Hamlet tells his mother that "reason panders will" [III. iv. 88]; and he instructs Yorick's skull to get him "to my lady's chamber, and tell her, let her paint an inch thick, to this favour she must come" [V. i. 193-94]. Earlier in the play he treats Polonius as a pander, and Polonius speaks of "loosing" Ophelia to Hamlet, as though she were an animal to be mated. Both Laertes and his father assume that Hamlet will try to seduce Ophelia.

Hamlet himself is troubled by the contrast between appearance and reality, between seeming and sincerity and these harlot images reinforce the point. But the same imagery is used for a different purpose: a witty exchange between Hamlet and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern ends with the statement that Fortune is a strumpet. Later in the same scene, in the extract from the Dido play [II. ii. 493], Aeneas cries: "Out, out, thou strumpet, Fortune!" Hamlet tells Horatio that he admires him as one who is not passion's slave, one who has accepted "Fortune's buffets and rewards" [III. ii. 67], one who is

not a pipe for Fortune's finger
To sound what stop she please.
[III. ii. 70-1]

In the same scene Hamlet asks Guildenstern:

Do you think I am easier to be play'd on than a pipe?
[III. ii. 369-70]

The Fortune theme is brought out in other ways—the Player King declares that it is not strange "That even our Loves should with our fortunes change" [III. ii. 201] and he gives as an example the desertion of a fallen great man by his favourites; Hamlet comments on the way courtiers who used to mock Claudius now wear his portrait round their necks and on the way the adult actors have lost their popularity; and Rosencrantz, in describing how the lives of subjects depend on the life of the King, uses the image of the wheel of Fortune.

I tried to show in my book on Hamlet [Shakespeare: "Hamlet"] that before the end of the play the fortune theme is modified. Instead of the strumpet fortune, the blind fate which directs our lives, we have the idea of a
providence which directs our lives. Hamlet declares:

There’s a divinity that shapes our ends
Rough-hew them how we will.
[V. ii. 10-11]

This newly-found conviction enables him to face what he thinks may be his death, with the confidence that an opportunity will be provided for him to execute justice on his father's murderer: "We defy augury: there is a special providence in the fall of a sparrow" [V. ii. 219-20]. (pp. 353-58)

I have left to the end what by my reckoning is the largest group of images. This is derived not from sickness, but from war. Many of these war images may have been suggested by the elder Hamlet's campaigns and by the activities of Fortinbras; but we should remember that Prince Hamlet himself is not without martial qualities, and this fact is underlined by the rites of war ordered for his obsequies and by Fortinbras' final tribute. But the dramatic function of the imagery is no doubt to emphasise that Claudius and Hamlet are engaged in a duel to the death, a duel which does ultimately lead to both their deaths.

Hamlet speaks of himself and his uncle as mighty opposites, between whose "pass and fell incensed points" [V. ii. 61] Rosencrantz and Guildenstern had come. All through the play the war imagery reminds us of the struggle. Bernardo proposes to "assail" Horatio's ears which are "fortified against" his story. Claudius in his first speech tells of discretion fighting with nature and of the defeated joy of his wedding. Later in the scene he complains that Hamlet has a heart unfortified. Laertes urges his sister to "keep in the rear" of her affection,

Out of the shot and danger of desire;
[I. iii. 34-5]

and he speaks of the "calumnious strokes" sustained by virtue and of the danger of youth's rebellion. Ophelia promises to take Laertes' advice as a "watchman" to her heart. Polonius in the same scene carries on the same imagery: he urges her to set her "entreatments at a higher rate Than a command to parley" [I. iii. 122-23]. In the next scene Hamlet speaks of the way "the o'ergrowth of some complexion" breaks down "the pales and forts of reason" [I. iv. 27-8]. Polonius compares the temptations of the flesh to a "general assault". The noise of Ilium's fall "takes prisoner Pyrrhus' ear" [II. i.477], and Pyrrhus' sword is "rebellious to his arm" [II. ii. 470]. Hamlet thinks the actor would "cleave the general ear with horrid speech", and says that "the clown shall make those laugh whose lungs are tickle o'th'sere" (i.e. easily set off) [II. ii. 563, 323-24]. He speaks of "the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune" and derides the King for being "frighted with false fire" [III. i. 57; III. ii. 266]. Rosencrantz talks of the "armour of the mind" [III. iii. 12] and Claudius admits that his "guilt defeats" his "strong intent" [III. iii. 40].

Hamlet fears that Gertrude's heart is so brazed by custom that it is "proof and bulwark against sense", and he speaks of the way "compulsive ardour" (sexual appetite) "gives the charge" [III. iv. 86]. He tells his mother that he will outwit Rosencrantz and Guildenstern:

For 'tis the sport to have the engineer
Hoist with his own petar; and it shall go hard
But I will delve one yard below their mines
And blow them at the moon.
[III. iv. 206-09]

The Ghost speaks of Gertrude's "fighting soul". Claudius says that slander's whisper
As level as the cannon to his blank
Transports his pois'ned shot.
[IV. i. 42-3]

He tells Gertrude that when sorrows come,

They come not single spies
But in battalions!
[IV. v. 78-9]

and that Laertes' rebellion,

Like to a murd'ring piece, in many places
Gives me superfluous death.
[IV. v. 95-6]

In explaining to Laertes why he could not openly proceed against Hamlet because of his popularity with the people, he says that his arrows,

Too slightly timber'd for so loud a wind.
Would have reverted to my bow again,
But not where I have aim'd them.
[IV. vii. 22-4]

Hamlet, in apologising to Laertes, says that his killing of Polonius was accidental:

I have shot my arrow o'er the house
And hurt my brother.
[V. ii. 243-44]

(These last two images are presumably taken from archery rather than from battle.) Gertrude compares Hamlet's hairs to "sleeping soldiers in the alarm".

Six of the images are taken from naval warfare. Polonius tells Ophelia he thought Hamlet meant to wreck her [II. i. 110] and he advises Laertes to grappe his friends to his "heart with hoops of steel" [I. iii. 63] and, in a later scene, he proposes to board the Prince [II. ii. 170]. Hamlet, quibbling on "crafts", tells his mother:

O, 'tis most sweet
When in one line two crafts directly meet.
[III. iv. 209-10]

In the same scene he speaks of hell that mutines in a matron's bones; and, in describing his voyage to England, he tells Horatio:

Methought I lay
Worse than the mutines in the bilboes.
[V. ii. 5-6]

In addition to the war images there are a large number of others that suggest violence. There are four images about knives, as when the Ghost tells Hamlet that his visitation is "to whet" his "almost blunted purpose" [III. iv. 111].
The images of war and violence should have the effect of counteracting some interpretations of the play, in which the psychology of the hero is regarded as the centre of interest. Equally important is the struggle between Hamlet and his uncle. Hamlet has to prove that the Ghost is not a devil in disguise, luring him to damnation, by obtaining objective evidence of Claudius' guilt. Claudius, for his part, is trying to pierce the secret of Hamlet's madness, using Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, Ophelia, and finally Gertrude as his instruments. Hamlet succeeds in his purpose, but in the very moment of success he enables Claudius to pierce the secret of his madness. Realising that his own secret murder has come to light, Claudius is bound to arrange for Hamlet's murder; and Hamlet, knowing that the truth of his antic disposition is now revealed to his enemy, realises that if he does not kill Claudius, Claudius will certainly kill him.

We have considered most of the patterns of imagery in the play—there are a few others which do not seem to throw much light on the meaning of the play—and I think it will be agreed that . . . the various image-patterns we have traced in *Hamlet* show that to concentrate on the sickness imagery, especially if it is divorced from its context, unduly simplifies the play. I do not pretend that a study of all the imagery will necessarily provide us with one—and only one—interpretation; but it will at least prevent us from assuming that the play is wholly concerned with the psychology of the hero. And that, I hope you will agree, is a step in the right direction. It may also prevent us from adopting the view of several modern critics—Wilson Knight, Rebecca West, Madariaga, L. C. Knights—who all seem to me to debase Hamlet's character to the extent of depriving him of the status of a tragic hero. It may also prevent us from assuming that the complexities of the play are due to Shakespeare's failure to transform the melodrama he inherited, and to the survival of primitive traits in his otherwise sophisticated hero. (pp. 361-63)


**Criticism: Hamlet**

**George Detmold**

[Detmold addresses the question of why Hamlet delays taking revenge on Claudius by assessing his status as a tragic hero. According to the critic, a tragic hero has three prominent characteristics: (1) a will-power which surpasses that of average people, (2) an exceptionally intense power of feeling, and (3) an unusually high level of intelligence. From this definition of a tragic hero, Detmold especially focuses on Hamlet's unorthodox demonstration of will-power in the play, arguing that the protagonist's preoccupation with moral integrity is what ultimately delays him from killing Claudius. Further, the critic asserts that Hamlet is distinct from other tragedies in that its action commences in the soliloquy of Act I, scene ii where most other tragedies end: "with the discovery by the tragic hero that his supreme good is forever lost to him." Perhaps the most significant reason why Hamlet hesitates, the critic concludes, is that although he is tempted by love, kingship, and even revenge, he is long past the point where he desires to do anything about them. None of these objectives gives him a new incentive for living. For further commentary on Hamlet's character, see the excerpts by David Bevington, Maynard Mack, Robert Hapgood, Robert R. Reed, Jr., René Girard, Oscar James Campbell, Arthur Kirsch, Kenneth Muir, Edgar Johnson, Ernest Jones, Theodore Litz and J. Dover Wilson.]

Hamlet is surely the most perplexing character in English drama. Who has not sympathized with the Court of Denmark in their bewilderment at his mercurial conduct? Theatre-goers, to be sure, are seldom baffled by him; perhaps the spectacle and melodrama of his undoing are powerful enough to stifle any mere doubts about his motives. But the more dispassionate audience of scholars and critics—if one may judge from the quantity of their published remarks—are often baffled. Seeking an intellectual satisfaction which will correspond to the pleasant purging of pity and terror in the spectator, they are only perplexed by Hamlet's behavior. They fail to
understand his motives. How can a man so dilatory, who misses every opportunity to achieve what apparently he desires, who requires nearly three months to accomplish a simple and well-justified killing—how can such a man be classed a tragic hero? Is he not merely weak and contemptible? How can he be ranked with such forceful men as Lear, Macbeth, Othello, or even Romeo? And yet he is a great tragic hero, as the playgoers will testify. The spectacle of his doings and undoing is profoundly stirring; it rouses the most intense emotions of awe and admiration; it never moves us to scorn or contempt.

In order to understand Hamlet, we must be able to answer the old question about him: "Why does he delay?" Granting—as he does—that he has sufficient "cause, and will, and strength, and means" [IV. iv. 45] to avenge his father, why should he require approximately three months to do so, and then succeed almost purely by accident or afterthought? There is only one possible reason why a strong, vigorous, intelligent man does not kill another when he feels no revulsion against the deed, when his duty requires that he do it, when he is not afraid, when the man to be killed is not invulnerable, and when the consequences of the act are either inconsiderable or are not considered at all. Hamlet delays to kill his uncle only because he has little interest in doing so. His thoughts are elsewhere. Most of the time he forgets about it, as we forget about a letter that should be answered—and only occasionally does he remember it and ponder his reluctance to perform this simple duty. Rightly or wrongly, he is preoccupied with other things.

Yet revenge, especially when it entails murder, is a tremendously important affair; how can any man overlook it? What kind of man can consider what kind of thing more important? Is Hamlet in any way unique, beyond or above or apart from our experience of human nature? Let us examine him as a man and—more important—as a tragic hero.

We must realize that there is nothing curious or abnormal about him. He is recognizably human; he is not diseased or insane. If this were not so he would rouse no admiration in an audience, for it will never accord to a sick or crazy man the allegiance it usually gives to the tragic hero. The normal attitude toward abnormality is one of aversion. We worship strength and health and power, and will identify ourselves with the hero who displays these qualities. We may even identify ourselves with a Lear during his temporary insanity, but only because we have known him sane and can appreciate the magnitude of his disaster. For the Fool who is his companion we can feel only a detached and tender compassion. Hamlet rouses stronger emotions than these, and only because we can recognize ourselves in him, because he is in the finest sense a universal man: Homo sapiens, man thinking—and man feeling, man acting. The proper habitat of the freak is the side-show or museum, not the stage.

But within this humanity and universality we may distinguish three characteristics which are usually found in the tragic hero. The first of these is a will-power surpassing in its intensity anything displayed by average men; the hero admits of no obstacle and accepts no compromise; he drives forward with all his strength to his desired goal. The second is a power of feeling likewise more intense than that possessed by average men; he rises to heights of happiness forever unattainable to the majority of us, and correspondingly sinks to depths of misery. The third is an unusually high intelligence, displayed in his actions and in his power of language. Aristotle sums up these characteristics in the term *hamartia*: the tragic flaw, the failure of judgment, the refusal to compromise. Passionately pursuing the thing he desires, the hero is incapable of compromise, of the calm exercise of judgment.

It will be seen that Hamlet possesses these three characteristics. His power of feeling surpasses that of all other characters in the play, expresses itself in the impassioned poetic diction peculiar to great tragedy. His intelligence is subtle and all-embracing, displaying itself not only in his behavior but also in word-plays beyond the comprehension of the others in the drama, and in metaphors beyond their attainment. But what can be said of his will-power, the one pre-eminently heroic characteristic? He is apparently a model of hesitation, indecision, procrastination; we seem to be witnessing an examination of the failure of his will. And yet demonstrably it has not failed, and does at odd moments stir itself violently. In no other way can we account
for the timidity of his enemies, the respect of his friends, and his own frank acknowledgement that he has "cause, and will, and strength, and means" to avenge his father. And though he is a long time in killing Claudius, he does kill him at last, and he is capable of other actions which argue the rash and impulsive nature of a man with strong will. He will "make a ghost" [I. iv. 85] of any man who tries to prevent him from following his father's spirit. He murders Polonius. He engineers the murder of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. He boards the pirate ship single-handed. He takes so long to kill Claudius only because he has little interest in revenge—not because he lacks will, but because it is inactive. Will-power does not spread itself in a circle around the possessor, but lies in a straight line toward the thing he desires.

Hamlet, then, has the heroic traits of Lear, Othello, Tamburlaine, Macbeth, and Oedipus: high intelligence, deep sensitivity, and strong will. There is another characteristic of the tragic hero without which the former ones would never be perceived: his delusion that there is some one thing in the world supremely good or desirable, the possession of which will make him supremely happy. And to the acquisition of the thing he desires he devotes all his will, all his intelligence, all his power of feeling. Thus Romeo dedicates himself to the pursuit of love, Macbeth to power, Lear to filial gratitude—and Hamlet to moral beauty.

Hamlet's dedication to moral beauty is not difficult to perceive; and once understood, it explains his every action in the play. It is probably an unusual subject for devotion: love, honor, power, wealth, intellectual supremacy are the more customary idols of the tragic hero. Yet Hamlet seems a more normal character than Coriolanus or Barabas [in Christopher Marlowe's The Jew of Malta], and a more sympathetic one than Macbeth or Othello. There should be nothing unusual in a preoccupation with morality, since man is a moral animal as well as a greedy, a passionate, or an intelligent one. And there is nothing harsh or unlovely in Hamlet's conception of the good. He is no Puritan. What he seeks among men is not mere compliance with religious and ethical standards, but a moral loveliness in their thoughts and actions. Men, in his conception, are godlike; they should not conduct themselves like beasts. "What a piece of work is a man! how noble in reason! how infinite in faculties! in form and moving how express and admirable! in action how like an angel, in apprehension how like a god!" [II. ii. 303-07]—whether the words are spoken in seriousness or in irony they argue a deep-seated idealism in their author.

It is clear that, at some point before the opening of the play, Hamlet has been completely disillusioned. He has failed to discover moral beauty in the world; indeed, by the intensity of his search he has roused instead his supreme evil: moral ugliness. The majority of us, the non-heroes, might disapprove of the sudden remarriage of a mother after the death of her husband—but we would probably not be nauseated. Hamlet, supremely sensitive to the godliness and beastliness in men, was overwhelmed by what he could interpret as nothing but lust. To be sure, the marriage of his mother and uncle was technically incestuous. But his objection to it lies much deeper than surface technicalities. He has worshipped his father, adored his mother (his love for her is everywhere apparent beneath his bitterness). Gertrude has mourned at the funeral "like Niobe, all tears" [I. ii. 149]. And then within a month she has married his uncle—a vulgar, contemptible, scheming drunkard—exposing without shame her essentially shallow, thoughtless, amoral, animal nature.

The blow has been too much for Hamlet, sensitive as he is to moral beauty.

O, most wicked speed, to post With such dexterity to incestuous sheets! It is not, nor it cannot come to good. [I. ii. 156-58]

That is, it cannot come to his conception of the good, whatever may be said for Gertrude's. He is unable to offer her understanding or sympathy, since to do so would mean compromising with his ideal of her. He fails to realize that no amount of scolding will ever improve her. Instead of accepting her conduct as inevitable or even endurable, he fights it, exaggerates it into a disgusting and intolerable sin against everything he holds dear. And because the sin may not be undone, and since it has destroyed his pleasure and purpose in living, he wishes to die. The only thing that restrains him from suicide is the moral injunction against it:
O that this too too sullied flesh would melt, Thaw and resolve itself into a dew, Or that the Everlasting had not fix'd His canon 'gainst self-slaughter. [I. ii. 129-32]

The longing for death, once the supreme good has been destroyed, is entirely normal and usual in the tragic hero. Romeo, hearing that Juliet is dead, goes immediately to her tomb in order to kill himself:

O, here Will I set up my everlasting rest And shake the yoke of inauspicious stars From this world-wearied flesh... Thou desperate pilot, now at once run on The dashing rocks thy sea-sick weary bark. [Romeo and Juliet, V. iii. 110-14]

Othello, when he realizes that in seeking to preserve his honor he has ruined it, prepares to die in much the same state of mind:

Here is my journey's end, here is my butt And very sea-mark of my utmost sail. [Othello, V. ii. 267-68]

Macbeth, discovering at last that his frantic efforts to maintain and increase his power have only destroyed it, finds life a tale told by an idiot—and he too longs for death:

I 'gin to be a-weary of the sun, And wish the estate of the world were now undone. Ring the alarum bell. Blow wind, come wrack, At least we'll die with harness on our back. [Macbeth, V. v. 48-51]

Lear, instead of dying, is driven mad. His counterpart, Gloucester, who also has lived for the love of his children, tries to throw himself from the cliff at Dover. Oedipus [in Sophocles's Oedipus Rex], too, when he discovers that he has ruined the city he tried to save, finds life worthless—blinds himself, and begs to be cast out of Thebes. As a general rule, whenever the tragic hero discovers that in his efforts to attain his supreme good he has only aroused his supreme evil, he kills himself, or goes mad, or otherwise sinks into a state that is death compared to his former state. Once he has lost all hope of gaining what he desires, he quite naturally finds no reason for continuing to live. Life in itself is always meaningless to him; he lives only for the good that he can find in it.

The curious thing about Hamlet is that it begins at the point where most other tragedies end: with the discovery by the tragic hero that his supreme good is forever lost to him. The play is surely unique among great tragedies. Elizabethan drama usually presents a double reversal of fortune—the rise and fall in the hero's prosperity and happiness—or sometimes, as in King Lear, the fall and rise. Greek tragedy, limited to a single curtainless stage and thus to a late point of attack in the plot, could show only a single reversal—usually the fall in fortune from prosperity to misery, as is observed by Aristotle. But certainly nowhere else is there a tragedy like Hamlet, with no reversal at all, which begins after the rise and fall of the hero have taken place, in which the action does not coincide with his pursuit of the good, and which presents him throughout in despair and in bad fortune. We never see Hamlet striving for or possessing his good. Rather, he knows only the evil which is its counterpart; and in this unhappy condition he finds nothing further desirable except death. The kingship does not interest him; love does not interest him; revenge never interests him for long. He can think only about the foulness of mankind, of the beastly conduct of those people from whom he has expected the most godly—and in his despair he is intensely unhappy. Death, he knows, will be his only release. We find him longing for death at the outset of the play, in his first speech to us. Death is continually on his mind until he finally attains it at the end, the only "felicity" of which life is capable.

We are now in a position to understand why Hamlet takes so long to effect his revenge. Everyone in the play, including himself, recognizes that he is potentially dangerous, that he has the necessary courage and will to accomplish anything he desires. But the demand upon these qualities has come at a time when he has forever
lost interest in exercising them. Upholding the divinity of man, he is betrayed by the one he thought most
divine, exposed to her rank shameless adultery, bitterly disillusioned in all mankind, and desperate of any
further good in existence. The revelation by the Ghost that murder has cleared a way for the new husband
shocks Hamlet to the base of his nature, but it gives him no new incentive for living; it merely adds to his
misfortune and confirms him in his despair. The further information that his mother has committed adultery
provides a final shock. All evidence establishes him immovably in his disillusion. The Ghost's appeal to him
for revenge is, remotely, an appeal to his good: if he may not reestablish the moral beauty of the world he may
at least punish those who have violated it. But it is a distant appeal. The damage already done is irreparable.
After giving passionate promises to "remember" his father, he regrets them:

The time is out of joint; O cursed spite, That ever I was born to set it right. [I. v. 188-89]

Within ten minutes after his first meeting with the Ghost he has succumbed again to his anguish, which is now
so intense after the discovery of his mother's adultery and the murder of his father that his mind threatens to
crack under the strain. His conversation with his friends is so strange that Horatio comments upon it:

These are but wild and whirling words, my lord. [I. v. 133]

A few minutes later Hamlet announces his intention to feign madness, to assume an "antic
disposition"—presumably as a means of relieving his surcharged feelings and possibly forestalling true
madness, but certainly not as a means of deceiving Claudius and thus accomplishing his revenge. At the
moment there is no point in deceiving Claudius, who knows of no witnesses to the murder and who is more
vulnerable to attack now than he will be at any point later in the play.

Two months later the antic disposition has succeeded only in arousing the King's suspicions. Hamlet has not
effectected his revenge; there is no sign that he has even thought about it. All we know is that he is badly
upset—as Ophelia reports to her father:

My lord, as I was sewing in my closet, Lord Hamlet, with his doublet all unbrac'd, No hat
upon his head, his stockings foul'd, Ungartered and down-gyved to his ancle, Pale as his shirt,
his knees knocking each other, And with a look so piteous in purport As if he had been loosed
out of hell To speak of horrors, he comes before me, [II. i. 74-81]

It is doubtful that he wishes to deceive the court into thinking that he is mad with unrequited love—only the
fool Polonius is so deceived. Most probably he goes to Ophelia because he loves her as he loves his mother,
fears to discover in her the same corruption that has poisoned his mind towards Gertrude. He suspects that
her love for him is insincere; his suspicions are later reinforced when he catches her acting as the decoy of
Claudius and Polonius. But the one significant thing here is that his mind is still upon his old sorrow and not
upon his father.

He does not recall his father until the First Player, in reciting the woes of Troy, speaks of the "mobled queen"
who

saw Pyrrhus make malicious sport In mincing with his sword her husband's limbs. [II. ii.
513-14]

Shortly afterwards Hamlet asks him to "play the Murder of Gonzago" and to "study a speech of some dozen
lines, which I would set down and insert in't" [II. ii. 541-42]. This, as we learn in the following soliloquy, is to
be a trap for the conscience of Claudius. And why is a trap necessary? Because perhaps the Ghost was not a
true ghost, but a devil trying to lure him to damnation. Most likely Hamlet is here rationalizing, trying to find
an excuse for his dilatoriness, for forgetting the injunction of his father—yet the excuse is a poor one, for
never before has he questioned the authenticity of the Ghost. Furthermore, he does not wait for the trap to be sprung; throughout the performance of "The Mousetrap" he seems convinced of the guilt of Claudius, he taunts him with it. But for a while he has stilled his own conscience and found a refuge from the flood of self-incrimination.

Before "The Murder of Gonzago" is enacted we see Hamlet alone once more. What is on his mind? His uncle? His father? Revenge? Not at all. "To be, or not to be, that is the question" [III. i. 55ff.]. He is back where he started, and where he has been all along, with

The heart-ache, and the thousand natural shocks That flesh is heir to. [III. i. 61-2]

He is still preoccupied with death.

"The Mousetrap" convicts Claudius beyond any doubt; he bolts from the room, unable to endure for a second time the poisoning of a sleeping king. And yet Hamlet, fifteen minutes later, with an admirable opportunity to kill his uncle, fails to do so—for reasons that are evidently obscure even to himself. He wishes, he says, not only to kill the man, but to damn his soul as well, and thus will wait to kill him unconfessed. At this, apparently, the Ghost itself loses patience, for it returns once more to Hamlet in the next scene and exhorts him:

Do not forget: this visitation Is but to whet thy almost blunted purpose. [III. iv. 110-11]

The exhortation is wasted. On the same night, Hamlet allows the King to send him to England. Possibly he has no recourse but obedience; probably he knows what is in store for him; quite likely he does not care, may even welcome a legitimate form of dying; certainly he cannot, in England, arrange to kill his uncle. The next day, on his way to exile and death, he meets the army of Fortinbras, whose courage and purposefulness stimulate him to reflect upon his own conduct:

How all occasions do inform against me, And spur my dull revenge! [IV. iv. 32-3]

He considers how low he has sunk in his despair:

What is a man, If his chief good and market of his time Be but to sleep and feed? A beast, no more. [IV. iv. 33-4]

Lamenting nothing in men so much as their beastliness, he has become little better than a beast himself. Why has he not performed the simple act of vengeance required by his dead father? He does not know:

Now, whether it be Bestial oblivion, or some craven scruple Of thinking too precisely on the event,— A thought which, quartered, hath but one part wisdom And ever three parts coward,—I do not know Why yet I live to say 'This thing's to do,' Sith I have cause, and will, and strength, and means To do 't. [IV. iv. 39-46]

He is ashamed to have forgotten his duty:

How stand I then, That have a father kill'd, a mother stain'd, Excitements of my reason and my blood, And let all sleep . . . ? [IV. iv. 56-9]

And with the resolve:

O, from this time forth, My thoughts be bloody, or be nothing worth! [IV. iv. 65-6]
he is off for England, where even the bloodiest thoughts will be utterly of no avail.

When he returns he is unchanged, still preoccupied with death. He haunts the graveyard with Horatio, reflects upon the democratizing influence of corruption. Overcome with disgust at the "rant" at Ophelia's funeral (he has seen too much insincerity at funerals), he wrestles with Laertes. He acquaints Horatio with the crimes of Claudius and resolves to revenge himself—and then accepts the invitation to the fencing match, aware that it is probably a trap, but resigned to whatever fate is in store for him. And with the discovery of his uncle's final perfidy, he stabs him with the envenomed foil and forces the poisoned wine down his throat. But there is still no thought of his father or of the accomplishment of an old purpose. He is stirred to action principally by anger at his mother's death:

Here, thou incestuous, murderous, damned Dane, Drink off this potion: is thy union here?
Follow my mother. [V. ii. 325-27]

The murder of Claudius is simply accomplished. We see how easily it could have been managed at any time in the past by a man like Hamlet, with whatever tools might have come to his hand. Even though the King is fully awake to his peril he is powerless to avert it. The only thing necessary is that Hamlet should at some time choose to kill him.

That Hamlet finally does so choose is the result of accident and afterthought. The envenomed foil, the poisoned wine, Laertes and Gertrude and himself betrayed to their deaths—these things finally arouse him and he strikes out at the King. But he has no sense of achievement at the end, no final triumph over unimaginable obstacles. His uncle, alive or dead, is a side-issue. His dying thoughts are of the blessedness of death and of the sanctity of his reputation—he would clear it of any suggestion of moral evil but realizes that he has no time left to do so himself. Accordingly he charges Horatio to stay alive a little while longer:

Absent thee from felicity a while, And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain, To tell my story. [V. ii. 347-49]

Then, after willing the kingdom to Fortinbras, he sinks into the oblivion which he has courted so long, and which now comes to him honorably and gives him rest. (pp. 23-34)


Ernest Jones

[Jones applies Sigmund Freud's techniques of psychoanalysis to Hamlet's character, asserting that the prince is afflicted with an Oedipus Complex. This psychological disorder involves the unconscious desire of a son to kill his father and take his place as the object of the mother's love. According to the critic, Hamlet delays taking revenge on Claudius because he identifies with his uncle and shares his guilt. Thus Hamlet's inaction stems from a "tortured conscience," and his affliction is caused by "repressed" feelings. Furthermore, this theory accounts for Hamlet's speaking to Gertrude like a jealous lover, dwelling on his mother's sexual relations with Claudius, and treating his uncle like a rival. Significantly, the critic also claims that while his father's murder evokes "indignation" in Hamlet, Gertrude's perceived "incest" awakes his "intensest horror." In addition, Jones maintains that the prince suffers from "psychoneurosis," or "a state of mind where the person is unduly, often painfully, driven or thwarted by the 'unconscious' part of his mind." This internal mental conflict reflects Hamlet's condition throughout much of the play..]

[The] whole picture presented by Hamlet, his deep depression, the hopeless note in his attitude towards the world and towards the value of life, his dread of death, his repeated reference to bad dreams, his
self-accusations, his desperate efforts to get away from the thought of his duty, and his vain attempts to find
an excuse for his procrastination; all this unequivocally points to a tortured conscience, to some hidden
ground for shirking his task, a ground which he dare not or cannot avow to himself. We have, therefore, . . . to
seek for some evidence that may serve to bring to light the hidden counter-motive.

The extensive experience of the psycho-analytic researches carried out by Freud and his school during the past
half-century has amply demonstrated that certain kinds of mental process show a greater tendency to be
inaccessible to consciousness (put technically, to be "repressed") than others. In other words, it is harder for a
person to realize the existence in his mind of some mental trends than it is of others. In order therefore to gain
a proper perspective it is necessary briefly to inquire into the relative frequency with which various sets of
mental processes are "repressed." Experience shows that this can be correlated with the degree of
compatibility of these various sets with the ideals and standards accepted by the conscious ego; the less
compatible they are with these the more likely are they to be "repressed." As the standards acceptable to
consciousness are in considerable measure derived from the immediate environment, one may formulate the
following generalization: those processes are most likely to be "repressed" by the individual which are most
disapproved of by the particular circle of society to whose influence he has chiefly been subjected during the
period when his character was being formed. Biologically stated, this law would run: "That which is
unacceptable to the herd becomes unacceptable to the individual member," it being understood that the term
herd is intended here in the sense of the particular circle defined above, which is by no means necessarily the
community at large. It is for this reason that moral, social, ethical, or religious tendencies are seldom
"repressed," for, since the individual originally received them from his herd, they can hardly ever come into
conflict with the dicta of the latter. This merely says that a man cannot be ashamed of that which he respects;
the apparent exceptions to this rule need not be here explained.

The language used in the previous paragraph will have indicated that by the term "repression" we denote an
active dynamic process. Thoughts that are "repressed" are actively kept from consciousness by a definite force
and with the expenditure of more or less mental effort, though the person concerned is rarely aware of this.
Further, what is thus kept from consciousness typically possesses an energy of its own; hence our frequent use
of such expressions as "trend," "tendency," etc. A little consideration of the genetic aspects of the matter will
make it comprehensible that the trends most likely to be "repressed" are those belonging to what are called the
innate impulses, as contrasted with secondarily acquired ones. . . . It only remains to add the obvious corollary
that, as the herd unquestionably selects from the "natural" instincts the sexual one on which to lay its heaviest
ban, so it is the various psycho-sexual trends that are most often "repressed" by the individual. We have here
the explanation of the clinical experience that the more intense and the more obscure is a given case of deep
mental conflict the more certainly will it be found on adequate analysis to centre about a sexual problem. On
the surface, of course, this does not appear so, for, by means of various psychological defensive mechanisms,
the depression, doubt, despair, and other manifestations of the conflict are transferred on to more tolerable and
permissible topics, such as anxiety about worldly success or failure, about immortality and the salvation of the
soul, philosophical considerations about the value of life, the future of the world, and so on.

Bearing these considerations in mind, let us return to Hamlet. . . . We . . . realize—as his words so often
indicate—that the positive striving for vengeance, the pious task laid on him by his father, was to him the
moral and social one, the one approved of by his consciousness, and that the "repressed" inhibiting striving
against the act of vengeance arose in some hidden source connected with his more personal, natural instincts.
The former striving . . . indeed is manifest in every speech in which Hamlet debates the matter: the second is,
from its nature, more obscure and has next to be investigated.

This is perhaps most easily done by inquiring more intently into Hamlet's precise attitude towards the object
of his vengeance, Claudius, and towards the crimes that have to be avenged. These are two: Claudius' incest
with the Queen, and his murder of his brother. Now it is of great importance to note the profound difference in
Hamlet's attitude towards these two crimes. Intellectually of course he abhors both, but there can be no
question as to which arouses in him the deeper loathing. Whereas the murder of his father evokes in him indignation, and a plain recognition of his obvious duty to avenge it, his mother's guilty conduct awakes in him the intensest horror. (pp. 64-8)

Now, in trying to define Hamlet's attitude towards his uncle we have to guard against assuming offhand that this is a simple one of mere execration, for there is a possibility of complexity arising in the following way: The uncle has not merely committed each crime, he has committed both crimes, a distinction of considerable importance, since the combination of crimes allows the admittance of a new factor, produced by the possible inter-relation of the two, which may prevent the result from being simply one of summation. In addition, it has to be borne in mind that the perpetrator of the crimes is a relative, and an exceedingly near relative. The possible inter-relationship of the crimes, and the fact that the author of them is an actual member of the family, give scope for a confusion in their influence on Hamlet's mind which maybe the cause of the very obscurity we are seeking to clarify.

Let us first pursue further the effect on Hamlet of his mother's misconduct. Before he even knows with any certitude, however much he may suspect it, that his father has been murdered he is in the deepest depression, and evidently on account of this misconduct. (p. 69)

According to [A. C] Bradley, [in his Shakespearean Tragedy], Hamlet's melancholic disgust at life was the cause of his aversion from "any kind of decided action." His explanation of the whole problem of Hamlet is "the moral shock of the sudden ghastly disclosure of his mother's true nature," and he regards the effect of this shock, as depicted in the play, as fully comprehensible. He says:

Is it possible to conceive an experience more desolating to a man such as we have seen Hamlet to be; and is its result anything but perfectly natural? It brings bewildered horror, then loathing, then despair of human nature. His whole mind is poisoned. . . . A nature morally blunter would have felt even so dreadful a revelation less keenly. A slower and more limited and positive mind might not have extended so widely through the world the disgust and disbelief that have entered it.

But we can rest satisfied with this seemingly adequate explanation of Hamlet's weariness of life only if we accept unquestioningly the conventional standards of the causes of deep emotion. Many years ago [John] Connolly, a well-known psychiatrist, pointed out [in his A Study of Hamlet] the disproportion here existing between cause and effect, and gave as his opinion that Hamlet's reaction to his mother's marriage indicated in itself a mental instability, "a predisposition to actual unsoundness"; he writes: "The circumstances are not such as would at once turn a healthy mind to the contemplation of suicide, the last resource of those whose reason has been overwhelmed by calamity and despair." In T. S. Eliot's opinion, also, Hamlet's emotion is in excess of the facts as they appear, and he specially contrasts it with Gertrude's negative and insignificant personality [in his The Sacred Wood]. . . . We have unveiled only the exciting cause, not the predisposing cause. The very fact that Hamlet is apparently content with the explanation arouses our misgiving, for, as will presently be expounded, from the very nature of the emotion he cannot be aware of the true cause of it. If we ask, not what ought to produce such soul-paralysing grief and distaste for life, but what in actual fact does produce it, we are compelled to go beyond this explanation and seek for some deeper cause. In real life speedy second marriages occur commonly enough without leading to any such result as is here depicted, and when we see them followed by this result we invariably find, if the opportunity for an analysis of the subject's mind presents itself, "that there is some other and more hidden reason why the event is followed by this inordinately great effect. The reason always is that the event has awakened to increased activity mental processes that have been "repressed" from the subject's consciousness. His mind has been specially prepared for the catastrophe by previous mental processes with which those directly resulting from the event have entered into association. . . . In short, the special nature of the reaction presupposes some special feature in the mental predisposition. Bradley himself has to qualify his hypothesis by inserting the words "to a man such as we have seen Hamlet
We come at this point to the vexed question of Hamlet's sanity, about which so many controversies have raged. Dover Wilson authoritatively writes [in his *What Happens in Hamlet*]: "I agree with Loening, Bradley and others that Shakespeare meant us to imagine Hamlet as suffering from some kind of mental disorder throughout the play." The question is what kind of mental disorder and what is its significance dramatically and psychologically. The matter is complicated by Hamlet's frequently displaying simulation (the Antic Disposition), and it has been asked whether this is to conceal his real mental disturbance or cunningly to conceal his purposes in coping with the practical problems of this task? (pp. 70-3)

What we are essentially concerned with is the psychological understanding of the dramatic effect produced by Hamlet's personality and behaviour. That effect would be quite other were the central figure in the play to represent merely a "case of insanity." When that happens, as with Ophelia, such a person passes beyond our ken, is in a sense no more human, whereas Hamlet successfully claims our interest and sympathy to the very end. Shakespeare certainly never intended us to regard Hamlet as insane, so that the "mind o'erthrown" must have some other meaning than its literal one. Robert Bridges has described the matter with exquisite delicacy [in his *The Testament of Beauty*, I]:

> Hamlet himself would never have been aught to us, or we To Hamlet, wer't not for the artful balance whereby Shakespeare so gingerly put his sanity in doubt Without the while confounding his Reason.

I would suggest that in this Shakespeare's extraordinary powers of observation and penetration granted him a degree of insight that it has taken the world three subsequent centuries to reach. Until our generation (and even now in the juristic sphere) a dividing line separated the sane and responsible from the irresponsible insane. It is now becoming more and more widely recognized that much of mankind lives in an intermediate and unhappy state charged with what Dover Wilson well calls "that sense of frustration, futility and human inadequacy which is the burden of the whole symphony" and of which Hamlet is the supreme example in literature. This intermediate plight, in the toils of which perhaps the greater part of mankind struggles and suffers, is given the name of psychoneurosis, and long ago the genius of Shakespeare depicted it for us with faultless insight.

Extensive studies of the past half century, inspired by Freud, have taught us that a psychoneurosis means a state of mind where the person is unduly, and often painfully, driven or thwarted by the "unconscious" part of his mind, that buried part that was once the infant's mind and still lives on side by side with the adult mentality that has developed out of it and should have taken its place. It signifies internal mental conflict. We have here the reason why it is impossible to discuss intelligently the state of mind of anyone suffering from a psychoneurosis, whether the description is of a living person or an imagined one, without correlating the manifestations with what must have operated in his infancy and is still operating. That is what I propose to attempt here.

For some deep-seated reason, which is to him unacceptable, Hamlet is plunged into anguish at the thought of his father being replaced in his mother's affections by someone else. It is as if his devotion to his mother had made him so jealous for her affection that he had found it hard enough to share this even with his father and could not endure to share it with still another man. Against this thought, however, suggestive as it is, maybe urged three objections. First, if it were in itself a full statement of the matter, Hamlet would have been aware of the jealousy, whereas we have concluded that the mental process we are seeking is hidden from him. Secondly, we see in it no evidence of the arousing of an old and forgotten memory. And, thirdly, Hamlet is being deprived by Claudius of no greater share in the Queen's affection than he had been by his own father, for the two brothers made exactly similar claims in this respect—namely, those of a loved husband. The last-named objection, however, leads us to the heart of the situation. How if, in fact, Hamlet had in years gone
by, as a child, bitterly resented having had to share his mother's affection even with his own father, had regarded him as a rival, and had secretly wished him out of the way so that he might enjoy undisputed and undisturbed the monopoly of that affection? If such thoughts had been present in his mind in childhood days they evidently would have been "repressed," and all traces of them obliterated, by filial piety and other educative influences. The actual realization of his early wish in the death of his father at the hands of a jealous rival would then have stimulated into activity these "repressed" memories, which would have produced, in the form of depression and other suffering, an obscure aftermath of his childhood's conflict. This is at all events the mechanism that is actually found in the real Hamlets who are investigated psychologically.

The explanation, therefore, of the delay and self-frustration exhibited in the endeavour to fulfil his father's demand for vengeance is that to Hamlet the thought of incest and parricide combined is too intolerable to be borne. One part of him tries to carry out the task, the other flinches inexorably from the thought of it. How fain would he blot it out in that "bestial oblivion" which unfortunately for him his conscience contemns. He is torn and tortured in an insoluble inner conflict. (pp. 76-9)


Edgar Johnson

[Johnson discusses the major interpretations of Hamlet's character that have evolved over the past two centuries, concluding with Ernest Jones's Freudian reading of the role (see excerpt above). The critic takes particular exception to Jones's view of Hamlet, asserting that if such a perspective were true, there would be no moral dilemma in the tragedy. Johnson then details his own interpretation of the protagonist as a hero whose complex "dilemma is to disentangle himself from the temptation to wreak justice for the wrong reasons and in an evil passion, and to do what he must do at last for the pure sake of justice, for the welfare of the State, to weed the unweeded garden of Denmark and set right the time that is out of joint." The critic also focuses on the concept of appearance versus reality in Hamlet, applying this issue to the characters of Hamlet, Claudius, Polonius, and Laertes.]

I

Hamlet is a play and Hamlet is a character in that play. In exploring our topic, "The Dilemma of Hamlet," although the problem of the play and the problem of the man are tightly interknit, it is important for us to keep clearly in mind when we are talking about the one and when about the other.

My thesis about the play is that its leading theme is the relationship of appearance and reality—that its dilemma, or the series of dilemmas it poses for us, so to speak, is the difficulty of distinguishing between the actuality and the plausible appearance of wisdom or virtue or right action. This note is struck almost at the beginning, with Hamlet's acid, "I know not 'seems'" [I. ii. 76], and his hatred of hypocrisy and deception, coming hard upon his own distrustful and evasive answers to Horatius and Marcellus after speaking with his father's ghost, and followed immediately by his assumption of an "antic disposition" apparently designed to deceive Claudius and the Court into believing him insane, but leaving the spectator as well sometimes uncertain whether Hamlet's madness is assumed or whether his reason is breaking down under inward emotional strain. Madness and sanity, true wisdom and corruptly shrewd worldliness, real kingly leadership and tricky opportunism, genuine heroism and its showy counterfeit; these are some of the distinctions the play challenges us to make. But they lead us to Hamlet the man, about whom my thesis—partly paralleling that of G. R. Elliott [in his Scourge and Minister: A Study of "Hamlet" As Tragedy of Revengefulness and Justice]—is that his dilemma is not only to bring about justice but to do so in a right frame of mind and feeling, acting as the scourge and minister of heavenly justice, not poisoned in soul by vengefulness and hatred.
In order to test these two theses and explore the dilemmas they deal with, we must glance at what Hamlet himself is like and what happens in the drama that bears his name. It might seem at first that this is simply done, merely by reading the play or seeing it performed. But history shows an extraordinary chaos of voices offering confused and contradictory explanations of both.

First, there is what may almost be called the orthodox version of the past one hundred and fifty years, the romantic interpretation that sees the young Prince Hamlet as an introvert entangled in hesitating thought to the point where he is frustrated to follow any course of action. This is the view of Hamlet's character most early and most eloquently voiced by [Johann Wolfgang von] Goethe and [Samuel Taylor] Coleridge. "A lonely, pure, noble and most moral character, without the strength of nerve that forms the hero," Goethe says of Hamlet, "sinks beneath the burden which it cannot bear and must not cast away. Impossibilities are required of him; not in themselves impossibilities, but such for him. He winds, and turns, and torments himself; he advances and recoils; is ever put in mind, ever puts himself in mind; at last does all but lose his purpose from his thoughts; yet still without recovering his peace of mind."

This description seems to imply that Shakespeare's hero was a fusion of Goethe's own Werther and Wilhelm Meister [in The Sorrows of Young Werther and Wilhelm Meister's Travels]; Coleridge paid Hamlet the compliment of assuming that Shakespeare had been painting a sixteenth century version of the nineteenth century Coleridge. "He intended," wrote Coleridge, "to portray a person in whose view the external world and all its incidents and objects, were comparatively dim and of no interest in themselves, and which began to interest only when they were reflected in the mirror of his mind. . . . [Hamlet indulges in] endless reasoning and hesitating—constant urgency and solicitation of the mind to act, and as constant an escape from action; ceaseless reproaches of himself for sloth and negligence, while the whole energy of his resolution evaporates in these reproaches. This, too, not from cowardice, for he is drawn as one of the bravest of his time—not from want of forethought or slowness of apprehension, for he sees through the very souls of those who surround him; but merely from that aversion to action which prevails among such as have a world in themselves."

Such a view of Hamlet is on the whole accepted by [A. C] Bradley and E. K. Chambers, and is essentially that of Laurence Olivier's film version of the play [see Sources for Further Study], where, in the beginning, while ghostly mists swirl around the battlements and cold vaulted interiors of Elsinore, a disembodied voice intones, "This is the tragedy of a man who could not make up his mind."

Opposed to this judgment is the approach of those like [George Lyman] Kittredge, who see Hamlet as a man of action moving to avenge his father's death with no essential hesitation and all practicable dispatch, his self-reproaches caused only by chafing at the slowness imposed upon him by circumstances. This Hamlet demands, in conscience, to be sure, reasonable certitude that he has not been deceived by a lying phantom. When he has that assurance, in the King's guilty reaction to the play-within-the-play, he is still delayed by the difficulty of producing objective proof, convincing to the world, that he has not simply invented an accusation to justify regicide and a merely ambitious desire to seize the throne. This view argues, furthermore, that as a King, Claudius—except on the one accidental occasion when Hamlet comes on him at his prayers—is constantly surrounded by armed courtiers and attendants and even a corps of Swiss mercenaries; and after Hamlet has put him on his guard by showing that his crime is known, he not only takes steps for his own safety by sending Hamlet off to what he hopes will be the nephew's death in England, but would not be likely to let Hamlet approach him thenceforth without being surrounded by protection. In the culminating duel scene, it is only the conspiracy between Claudius and Laertes to kill Hamlet that allows him to be in the King's presence armed—and even then only in consequence of seizing Laertes's foil, the single one with an unbated point.

J. Dover Wilson, in turn, takes issue with a part of this argument by insisting that Hamlet never wanted to prove to the world that Claudius was his father's murderer. Such a view would always leave at least a stain of suspicion that Queen Gertrude was implicated, and, indeed, until after the play scene, in the interview in his
mother's closet. Hamlet himself is by no means certain that she has not been privy to his father's death. But the ghost has bade Hamlet leave her to heaven, and therefore Hamlet has with great ingenuity, Wilson argues, devised the play to show Claudius that his guilt is known, but at the same time to make it appear to the scandalized court that it embodies his own threat to murder the present King. (Hamlet himself, you will recall, identifies the murderer in the play as nephew to the King.)

W. W. Greg has devised a still more radical overturn of previous themes. For him, the reason Claudius fails to be alarmed by the dumbshow of the murder, but breaks up the performance of the play, is that he is in fact innocent. He has not recognized the dumbshow as directed against himself, but does, with the court, take the subsequent action of the play as prefiguring an attempt on his own life. The ghost's accusations, heard by no one but Hamlet, are simply a hallucinating projection of his own deluded suspicions and have no basis in fact. Hamlet is in truth even madder than he has been pretending to be.

T. S. Eliot concludes that none of these explanations will really do. More, Hamlet's self-disgust and his revulsion at his mother's adultery and what Hamlet calls her incest, the nauseated loathing with which his imagination dwells in revolting detail upon "The bloat King" "honeying and making love" to his mother "in the rank sweat of an enseamed bed" "over the nasty sty" [III. iv. 182, 92-4], seem to Eliot emotions so excessive for the facts that he regards them as insufficiently motivated in the drama, and drawn from some hidden source in Shakespeare himself. "Hamlet," he says, "... is full of some stuff that the writer could not drag to light, contemplate, or manipulate into art." Consequently, "So far from being Shakespeare's masterpiece, the play is certainly a failure."

At this point, generations of theatergoers who have regarded Hamlet with absorbed sympathy and no conscious puzzlement whatever might well feel tempted to exclaim in the witty words of one Shakespearean commentator, "Are the critics of Hamlet mad or only pretending to be?" We seem to be in Edmund Spenser's wandering wood in which the thousands of paths lead only to Error's Den [in The Faerie Queene]. But there is one more, with which I shall bring this survey of the critics to a conclusion, the psychoanalytic theory originally propounded by Freud and elaborated by Ernest Jones.

According to this, Hamlet is suffering from what he cannot possibly recognize himself, the Oedipal desire of a son to kill his father and supplant him in his mother's love. Only so, Jones claims, can we explain Hamlet speaking to her like a jealous lover, torturing himself with hideous images of her love-making, and hating the King with all the hysterical loathing of a rival. But because Claudius has done only what Hamlet himself desired to do, killed the father and mated with the mother, Hamlet partly identifies himself with his uncle, shares his guilt, and cannot bring himself to execute vengeance on one who has put into action what he himself dreamed in childhood fantasy. He consequently oscillates, between his conscious and acquired adult devotion to his father and his infantile hatred and aggression, and is inhibited from acting upon either. He would never be able to act effectively on either of his divided motives, and only accident brings the play to a catastrophic ending as fatal to himself as to Claudius.

II

The refutation of the argument is essential in my position, for if Jones is right, there is no moral dilemma in the drama. By definition Hamlet cannot understand his difficulty; only if—what is impossible—we could bring a twentieth century psychoanalyst to the imaginary twelfth century court of Elsinore as described by the sixteenth century dramatist, could Hamlet be taught to resolve his own confusions and solve his problems. Such an objection, of course, does not dispose of Jones's theory, nor does any mere skepticism about Shakespeare having thus foreshadowed a Freudian case history. Only if there are within the play itself and its effect upon a fit audience elements that do not square with this explanation, may we set aside it or the Goethe-Coleridge interpretation of which it is a more scientific sounding variant. And in the same way, to deal with any of the interpretations we have surveyed, we must look to the play and the impression it must produce on an audience that responds to it in the way molded by the dramatist.
But there are such elements to negate many of these interpretations. It is a minor caveat, no doubt, to object that the interview between mother and son in the Queen's closet, with Polonius hiding behind the arras, does not take place in her bedroom, as Freud and Jones say, with Hamlet violently flinging her upon the bed in the way Olivier does in the film. In Shakespeare's day, a closet was a small private room or study; Queen Gertrude would no more receive Polonius in her bedroom than Queen Elizabeth II would Winston Churchill. But (what is more fatal for the entire Jones-Freud-Coleridge-Goethe theory) Hamlet has not, before the opening of the play, been at all a frustrated introvert entangled in morbid thought and incapable of action, nor, as I shall show, does he really—except in certain very limited respects—show himself inactive in the course of the play.

It is true that with his father's death he has been plunged into the deepest grief and melancholy and that his mother's hasty marriage has filled him with horror and revulsion. Hamlet does indeed bear within him a misery "that passes show" [I. ii. 85], and feels that the earth is "a sterile promontory" [II. ii. 299], the heavens "a pestilent congregation of vapors" [II. ii. 303], man a "quintessence of the dust" [II. ii. 308]. But it is important to note that the world had not been so for him; it had been a "goodly frame," the heavens a "majestical roof fretted with golden fire" [II. ii. 301], and man "the beauty of the world" [II. ii. 307], "the paragon of animals" [II. ii. 307]. In saying he has lost his mirth and foregone all customary exercise, he reveals that melancholy and inactivity had not been his habits when his father lived (of whom, according to Jones, he was no less secretly jealous than he now is of his uncle). But even now, throughout his present distresses, he does exercise, and has even moments of highspirited jesting. Before he becomes suspicious that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are spying emissaries of the King, his greeting of them is gay rather than gloomy; and we learn later that he has been practising fencing daily all the while Laertes has been in France, and see Hamlet easily outmatch that skilled swordsman.

Others in the play testify not only to his multitudinous and shining accomplishments, but to his ease, grace, and charm. "The courtier's, soldier's, scholar's, eye, tongue, sword; The expectancy and rose of the fair state; The glass of fashion and the mold of form, the observed of all observers," Ophelia says of him [III. i. 151-54]. These are not the words in which one would describe a melancholy moper, who could not take the place of brilliant leadership at court to which his rank entitled him. When he is dead, Fortinbras, deeming he a soldier's burial, summarizes general report in the valediction that "he was likely to have proved most royally" [V. ii. 397-98]. Are these the things others would say of an ineffectual dreamer?

Hamlet's behavior during the course of the play, furthermore, reveals none of the inwardturned embarrassment in social relations that characterize the introvert. He talks readily and cordially with soldiers, actors, gravediggers, gets along well with pirates, and is so beloved by the common people that Claudius dares not openly harm him, the last a popularity that introverts have seldom enjoyed with the populace. He easily takes command of any conversation in which he participates, usually with unassuming courtesy; and in the play scene he dominates the whole court. He is not hesitant or inhibited in action, even against Claudius; he plans the play to test the King's conscience in a flash, and carries it out flawlessly; he stabs Polonius through the arras more than half suspecting it to be the King (what of the notion that he cannot act against Claudius?); he sends the traitorous Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to their deaths instantly and without a qualm; he leaps on board the pirate ship before any can follow him; he accepts Laertes's challenge without a moment's pause; he sends Claudius a letter announcing himself landed naked in his Kingdom, as it were warning Claudius of his intentions; and he calmly plans to use the period before news can arrive from England to finish his task.

Jones argues that Hamlet's "mother fixation" stands between him and his courtship of Ophelia, but it does nothing of the kind. He has written her letters so ardent that Laertes warns her not to be moved by them, and won her with "words of so sweet breath composed," she herself says, "as made [his gifts] more rich" [III. i. 97-8]. He has not drawn back from her; it is she, obedient to her father's command, not of her own will, who has repulsed him. Where in all this is the self-frustrated lover?
Given Hamlet's intense but not at all abnormal devotion to his father, is there anything excessive in his disgust at his mother's conduct? In any society except that of second century Rome, Hollywood, or the fast set of a modern cosmopolitan city, a son might well be shocked at his mother's adultery. And for an Elizabethan audience there was no question that her marriage to Claudius was incest as well. When Henry VIII married his elder brother's widow, Catherine of Aragon, in 1509, it was necessary to support a dispensation permitting it by bringing forward testimony that her previous marriage had never been consummated, and the feeling of horror that such a wedding violated biblical law endured long past Shakespeare's day. Hamlet only gives eloquent voice to an emotion all sixteenth century audiences understood.

Finally, there is the allegation that Hamlet delays unconscionably, unintelligibly, and fatally in executing justice upon Claudius. One might ask why it is no sign of Claudius's having some Freudian complex that he delays, no less fatally for himself, to kill Hamlet, long after he has realized that his nephew is dangerous. But the truth is that neither is dilatory except for quite intelligible reasons. It was entirely clear to an Elizabethan audience that a ghost might be a lying spirit and that a Prince intent on acting justly must prove its accusations, however strongly he felt impelled to believe them. The events of Acts II and III, and the first half of Act IV, all take place in a single day and night, and that day is so short a time after Polonius has forbidden Ophelia to see Hamlet, that only then has Hamlet become aware that her avoidance of him is deliberate and made his way into her chamber. The very next day the players come to Elsinore, Hamlet forms his plan, and puts it into effect. After he has lost his one chance to kill the King at prayer, he is packed off to England under guard. The intervening time is only long enough to bring Laertes back from Paris and permit Hamlet to land from the pirate ship. Hamlet can hardly slay Claudius during Ophelia's burial, on sacred ground, but he knows he has until messages arrive from England, coolly plans to use that interim, and, when he finds himself poisoned, kills the King an instant later. What an indecisive, will-less jack-o'-dreams!

In thus analyzing the Freudian interpretation, I have also dealt implicitly with most of the others I outlined in the first third of this paper, but I should still say a few words about Greg's theory that Claudius is innocent and Hamlet suffering from delusions. Dover Wilson's suggestion that during the dumbshow Claudius is discussing with Polonius the renewed display Hamlet has just given them of love-madness, and consequently has not observed the pantomime, in my opinion, partly answers Greg, but he is fully refuted by Claudius's own soliloquy in the prayer scene where the King explicitly admits "the primal curse" of "a brother's murder" [III. iii. 37-8]. This is unanswerable and we need say no more of it.

III

There remains only to sketch in such aspects of my own position as have not been anticipated in the previous part of the discussion. The theme of the play, I have said, is the relationship of appearance and reality, the gradual classification of moral identities deliberately portrayed ambiguously in the beginning. "Something is rotten in the State of Denmark" [I. iv. 90], says Marcellus, and Hamlet cries out that it is "an unweeded garden" [I. ii. 135], lamenting "the time is out of joint: Oh cursed sprite, that ever I was born to set it right" [I. v. 188-89]. But we do not know at this point lest perhaps it is Hamlet himself who is the canker in the State, proud, revengeful, consumed with frustrated ambition to ascend the throne himself and rationalizing his fury at having been passed over in the election. (We might note that, like Hamlet, Fortinbras has failed to secure his father's throne, which is likewise now occupied by an uncle, but that unlike Hamlet he seems to feel no sense of injustice in this; he is more concerned to win back the half of Norway his father lost to the elder Hamlet.)

During the opening scenes of the play, I must re-emphasize the point, we do not know whether Hamlet or Claudius is in the right. Let us try to imagine seeing or reading it for the first time, without having heard anything about it. Can we tell with certainty that Hamlet's jealousies and suspicions are true in fact? The original Hamlet story in Saxo Grammaticus was a pure revenge drama, with small moral cause to prefer the murdered King to his fratricide brother; and Hamlet's motives are entirely those of filial partisanship demanding an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, not those of horror at a noble and virtuous King done to
death by an evil one. Not, of course, that the Elizabethan audience before whom Shakespeare's play was first acted was likely to have known anything about *Saxo Grammaticus*, but the earlier Hamlet play of the 1590's, from which Shakespeare probably derived his own, also seems in turn to have been derived from *Saxo Grammaticus* and possibly Belleforest, and to have been straight melodrama, with a ghost crying "Hamlet, revenge!" Elizabethan playgoers may well have been surprised by the turn Shakespeare gave the old materials. From neither the opening of *Hamlet* nor its title have we any more assurance that Hamlet will be justified in its sequel than we have of Julius Caesar being the hero or Macbeth the villain of the Shakespearean plays that bear their names.

In the same way, we have in the pseudo-kingly Claudius, at first, a deceptively persuasive imitation of genuine kingliness: dignity, courtesy, affability, vigorous and effective diplomatic and military action against external danger, an eloquent and seemingly sincere statement of sound principles, both of feeling and of conduct. It is possible, for all we know at the moment, that Hamlet may indeed be giving way to a too protracted, unmanly, and self-indulgent grief in which he evades his duty to himself and to others. There is even a real regard for Hamlet in Claudius at first, a genuine kindness and good feeling, and there is no question of his affection for his Queen. Even when by degrees we pierce beneath his smiling mask, we find that he still struggles with conscience, that his slowness to act against his dangerous nephew is not all policy, and that only after his situation has grown desperate is conscience strangled.

With the old councillor Polonius, we have an impressive appearance of wise understanding and justice of judgment gradually yielding to vanity, worldliness, and senility. When he bids Laertes be faithful in friendship, and tells him "To thine own self be true" [I. iii. 78], his morality sounds like that of Socrates, but the rest of his maxims are all prudential and concerned with the figure a man cuts in the world, rather than with essence—like his advice on money and on dress, a mere cautiousness of conduct or of taste. As the action proceeds, he sinks lower, and we see him willing to dispatch spies and informers upon his own son, eavesdropping and spying himself, flattering and hypocritical, obstinately determined to prove his own theories, a conceited busybody foolishly self-deceived.

Laertes is the pseudo-heroic as Claudius is the pseudo-kingly. How gallant a figure he seems at first, how earnest is his concern for his sister, how admirable his promptness of action in demanding an explanation of his father's death (strikingly contrasted with Hamlet's seeming—though only seeming—slowness). But then, in more significant contrast to Hamlet's insistence on having proof and acting in right conscience, see Laertes storming into the King's presence, shouting before he knows the facts, "Conscience and grace to the profoundest pit" [IV. v. 133], "To hell allegiance" [IV. v. 132], and follow how easily the smooth King not merely deludes him but works him to a weak participation in villainy. Laertes, like his fattier, is concerned with appearance, not reality; he wants "formal ostentation" of funeral rites for Polonius and is concerned lest the world think he has not done enough. "What ceremony else?" [V. i. 223], he demands at Ophelia's grave, and his showy sorrow revolts Hamlet's inward grief "which passes show" [I. ii. 85].

But Hamlet, the hero, too, is not all heroic, or only gradually becomes so. His wit is fiercely intolerant of stupidity and sycophancy; he is mockingly contemptuous of the affected Osric. He is consistently and publicly rude to Claudius, even before he knows the ghost's accusations; he is indecently discourteous, almost invariably, in deriding Polonius, whose daughter he loves; he is brutally harsh to his mother. Until well on in his plans, he is mistrustful of the sane and truehearted Horatio, refusing to confide in him, seeking neither the comfort nor the good counsel of a faithful friend, but bottling all his feelings and his purposes up within his breast in a proud and suspicious secrecy. He is insultingly suspicious of Ophelia, leaping from the realization that her pathetic attempt to return his gifts means that their encounter is no accident, as it was meant to seem, to the raging conviction that she is her father's willing tool conniving to betray him. With furious bitterness he all but calls her a whore, and, despite the likelihood that spies are listening, recklessly shouts, "We'll have no more marriages. Those that are married already, all but one, shall live" [in. i. 147-48]. Worst of all, for more than half the play, his determination to avenge his father's murder is a ferocious, hysterical, vindictive, bloody
hatred that he can hardly keep within bounds. It is revenge with hardly a trace of concern for any nobler concept of justice.

This is the dilemma of Hamlet the Prince and Man—to disentangle himself from the temptation to wreak justice for the wrong reasons and in evil passion, and to do what he must do at last for the pure sake of justice, for the welfare of the State, to weed the unweeded garden of Denmark and set right the time that is out of joint. From that dilemma of wrong feelings and right actions he ultimately emerges, solving the problem by attaining a proper state of mind. At the end of the play scene, it is true, he refuses to kill Claudius at prayer, and excuses that evasion to himself by arguing that he wants to damn his uncle's soul more deep in hell by taking him at some time that has no relish of grace or salvation in it. But there is no improbability in suggesting that Hamlet is trying here to excuse a reluctance he does not yet understand but that springs from a revolt of his own conscience against acting with such poisonous feeling. He is acting—or rather refraining—and right motives, but giving himself mistaken reasons. (It is a dramatic irony of course, that Claudius has been unable to pray with sincerity, and is not in a state of grace.)

Slowly, however, in the course of the last two acts, Hamlet subdues his violence of feeling. Even by the end of the interview in his mother's closet, he sorrows for his impetuous murder of Polonius: "For this same Lord," he says, "I do repent" [in. iv. 173]; and he gently bids his mother good night, telling her, "When you are desirous to be blest, I'll blessing beg of you" [in. iv. 171-72]. He prays Laertes's pardon for the wrong he has done him, and throughout all the ending moderates even those wild and whirling words of hatred he has previously spoken against Claudius. Instead he asks, calmly, "Is't not perfect conscience to quit him with this arm?" and prevent "This canker of our nature" from proliferating "further evil" [V. ii. 67-70]. He has resolved the moral dilemma of vengeance versus justice. (Although it is true that when he has transfixed the King with Laertes's "envenomed point" he has a last spasm of hatred for the "incestuous, murderous, damned Dane" \V. ii. 325\.) At the end, Hamlet is even able to think of providing for a peaceful succession to the crown by giving his dying voice to Fortinbras. He expires with noble serenity, "The rest is silence" [V. ii. 358]. He has purified his nature of its fierce passions and become the great and heroic figure we always felt struggling in him to be born. As restoring peace descends over troubled Denmark, we can echo Horatio:

Good night, sweet prince, And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest! [V. ii. 359-60] (pp. 99-111)


**Criticism: The Ghost**

**Kenneth Muir**

[Muir analyzes the Ghost in Hamlet in several ways, first by proposing several attitudes an Elizabethan audience may have held regarding its nature. The apparition may have been viewed as an illusion, a portent foreshadowing danger to Denmark, a spirit returning from the grave because a task was left undone, a spirit come from purgatory with divine permission, or a devil who assumes the form of a dead person to lure mortals to their doom. According to the critic, Hamlet tests each of these perspectives during the play's course of events, most notably in his production of "The Mousetrap." Muir also discusses the Ghost's two warnings to Hamlet, namely not to taint his mind and to leave Gertrude "to heaven." In addition, the critic explores Hamlet's reaction to his meeting with the Ghost by studying the nature of the prince's depression and his assumption of an "antic disposition."]
The first act of Hamlet, except for the third scene, is concerned with the revelation by the Ghost that Claudius is a murderer and Gertrude an adulteress. This revelation is carefully prepared. The Ghost appears twice in the first scene without speaking; and before his appearance, Shakespeare, without the aid of scenery or artificial lighting, creates in the course of the dialogue a vivid impression of time, place, coldness, and expectancy, and after the Ghost has vanished an equally vivid impression of dawn, four or five hours having passed in ten minutes of playing-time. We also hear in the first scene of preparations for war, and Bernardo thinks that the Ghost has come to warn them of the threat to the state. The scholar, Horatio, at first believes that the Ghost will not appear, and later addresses it as 'illusion'. According to the various beliefs current in Shakespeare's day, a ghost could be either an illusion, 'a phantom seen as a portent of danger to the state', a spirit come from the grave because of something left undone, a spirit come from purgatory by divine permission, or a devil disguised as a dead person in order to lure the living into mortal sin. All these theories are tested in the course of the play. Horatio, abandoning the idea that the Ghost is an illusion, assumes first that it has come as a portent and then that it can be laid if they carry out its wishes. When the Ghost appears to Hamlet himself in the fourth scene, both Marcellus and Horatio are afraid that it is a goblin damned rather than a spirit of health, and that it will drive the Prince into madness and suicide; and, although Hamlet, after he has listened to the Ghost's message, is fully convinced that it is indeed his father's spirit, later on he has moments of doubt when he thinks it may be the devil. He has, in any case, to obtain confirmation of the truth of the Ghost's story.

Hamlet appears for the first time in the second scene of the play, dressed in black, which is an implied criticism of the royal marriage which has just been celebrated. Claudius, although Hamlet dislikes him and regards him as a usurper, appears to be a competent and even an amiable ruler. After referring diplomatically to his marriage, dispatching ambassadors to Norway, and giving Laertes permission to return to France, he urges Hamlet to stop his excessive mourning, and not to return to Wittenberg. The audience, having already seen the Ghost, is aware that something is rotten in the state of Denmark, and will sympathise with Hamlet's feelings about his mother's hasty re-marriage, especially as marriage with a deceased husband's brother was not permitted without a special dispensation.

Hamlet's first soliloquy is designed to show his state of mind before his interview with the Ghost. He is profoundly shocked by Gertrude's marriage to his uncle in less than two months after her first husband's death, although he has no conscious suspicion that his father has been murdered or that his mother had committed adultery. He wishes suicide were permissible, he compares the world to Eden after the Fall, he contrasts Gertrude's two husbands, the godlike and the bestial, and, with a tendency to generalise characteristic of him, he assumes that all women are like his mother: 'Frailty, thy name is woman!' [I. ii. 146]. We learn later that the melancholy and disillusionment apparent in this soliloquy are not part of his normal state of mind. It is necessary to emphasise this, because those critics who form a low opinion of his character tend to forget that his behaviour in the play is partly explicable by the successive shocks he receives.

His depression and his tears are underlined by his initial failure to recognise Horatio; but he rouses himself sufficiently to make the bitter witticism about the funeral baked meats, and his cross-examination of the three men who have seen the Ghost reveals that his intelligence has not been blunted by his grief. It is apparent from the four-line soliloquy at the end of the scene, in which he speaks of 'foul play' and 'foul deeds', that he now suspects that his father has been murdered.

In the fourth scene, before the appearance of the Ghost, Hamlet is given a speech on the drunkenness of the court, which leads him to generalise on the way 'some vicious mole of nature' [I. iv. 24] or some bad habit out weighs a man's good qualities and destroys his reputation in the eyes of the world. Hamlet had already referred in the second scene to the drinking habits of the new court, and one function of this speech is to show the deterioration of Elsinore in the reign of Claudius. Another function, equally important from the theatrical point of view, is to distract the attention of the audience so that they are surprised by the reappearance of the Ghost, and this function is aided by the extreme complexity of the syntax, which would require the undivided attention of the audience.
Bernard Shaw spoke of the Ghost's part as one of the wonders of the play. . . . The weird music of that long speech . . . should be the spectral wail of a soul's bitter wrong crying from one world to another in the extremity of its torment.

He is, apparently, released from purgatory, although Shakespeare makes use of some of the characteristics of the classical Hades. He speaks of his 'foul crimes', which suggests that Hamlet has idealised his character; and it is stressed that he has been sent to his account 'Unhous'led, disappointed, unanel'd' [I. v. 77]—without having taken the sacrament, unprepared, and without having received extreme unction. Hamlet promises to sweep to his revenge, and the Ghost leaves him with two cautions:

Taint not thy mind, nor let thy soul contrive
Against thy mother aught.
[I. v. 85-6]

Gertrude is to be left to the prickings of conscience; but the meaning of the first four words of this sentence is ambiguous. They could refer to Hamlet's attitude to his mother, or they may have a more general application: he is to execute justice on Claudius, without allowing his own mind to become tainted with evil. It is important to realise that Hamlet's task is almost impossible. How can he kill Claudius in such a way that justice appears to be done, without at the same time exposing the guilt of his mother? It is apparent from the speech Hamlet utters immediately after the Ghost's disappearance that he is more concerned with his mother's guilt than with his uncle's blacker crime: he speaks first of her. It is also clear from this soliloquy and from the scene which follows that Hamlet's mind is reeling in the distracted globe of his skull. Knowing that he will be unable to behave normally till his vengeance is accomplished, he decides to 'put an antic disposition on', as Hieronimo (in The Spanish Tragedy) had done, or—to use a comparison made in The Historie of Hamblet—as the Brutus who had driven out the Tarquins had done. How near to breaking-point Hamlet is after the revelation by the Ghost is made apparent by his inability to stand, by his 'wild and whirling words' [I. v. 133] to his friends, and by the hysterical remarks about the 'fellow in the cellarage' [I. v. 151], which are not a sign of his egotism and callousness as Rebecca West assumes, but which may well make his friends suspect that the Ghost is the devil in disguise. The antic disposition is not merely a defence mechanism. It also enables Hamlet to play the role of Fool and so make remarks which will appear mad to everyone except the guilty King, and which are a means of undermining his self-control, so that his conscience will be caught by the performance of 'The Murder of Gonzago'.

Hamlet nearly reveals the Ghost's secret twice: first, when he breaks off to inform Horatio and Marcellus that

There's never a villain dwelling in all Denmark
But he's an arrant knave;
[I. v. 123-24]

and, secondly, when he begins:

It is an honest ghost, that let me tell you . . .
[I. v. 138]

and then finishes:

For your desire to know what is between us,
O'ermaster it as you may.
[I. v. 139-40]
Later on, off-stage, he makes Horatio his confidant; but he keeps the secret from Marcellus because he realises that his own safety depends on secrecy. The scene ends with a significant couplet:

The time is out of joint. O cursed spite,
That ever I was born to set it right
[I. v. 188-89]

These lines, in which Hamlet both accepts and revolts against his mission, contrast with his earlier promise to 'sweep to his revenge' [I. v. 31], and with his determination to confront the Ghost, when his fate cries out: they prepare the way for the long months of inaction. (pp. 20-3)


**Criticism: Claudius**

Bertram Joseph

[Joseph examines the concept of appearance versus reality with regard to Claudius's character in Hamlet. When the play begins, the critic asserts, there is no indication that Claudius is a villain; rather, he appears to be the consummate monarch, who effectively transacts private and public business. As the play progresses, however, the quality of his villainy is gradually revealed to the audience. Joseph also defines the term "hypocrisy" in relation to Claudius, maintaining that Elizabethans viewed it as a particularly serious character flaw. The king's hypocrisy is perhaps most evident in his eloquent speech in Act I, scene ii in which he openly discusses his hasty marriage to Gertrude and downplays its awkwardness by providing sound reasons for establishing the union. As a result, the grief-stricken Hamlet—with whom we are supposed to identify—seems to be the only abnormal character at the court. The critic explores several Renaissance perspectives on Claudius's character which might not be apparent to a modern audience. For instance, Joseph maintains that an Elizabethan audience would not likely sympathize with the monarch as he tries to pray in Act III, scene iii, for his admission of sinning coupled with his inability to repent only makes his wickedness more pronounced. Further, the critic shows how Elizabethan audiences would understand that images of sickness and disease in the play relate to Claudius's hypocrisy. Finally, Joseph notes that the king's duplicity reflects a truly evil devilishness and discusses the concept of "white devil"—a term given to hypocrites by Martin Luther—in relation to this observation.]

The last minutes of the play are taken up with preparations for the dead to be placed "high on a stage . . . to the view," as silent witnesses when Horatio comes to tell the

yet unknowing world
How these things came about.
[V. ii. 379-80]

What is there to be told? No more than we, the audience or the readers, have just lived through in our imagination with the poet. And yet we have not imagined the whole of the story as it was present in its author's mind unless we remember, unless we are acutely conscious of, the fact that it is concerned with a country still completely unaware of what has been taking place since the murder of the elder Hamlet.

Horatio has now to speak of that murder, telling how it was committed by Claudius, the brother who seized the throne and lived incestuously with the murdered king's widow. There will be mention of the Ghost, the Mousetrap, the unintentional killing of Claudius and its results. Denmark must learn of the plot to kill the Prince in England, of the foul details of the second plot after his sudden return home. It is a story of
rebounding treachery and multiple slaughter, with the wiping out not of Hamlet alone, but of Gertrude, Laertes, and finally of Claudius himself. At this moment, if we imagine Horatio about to tell all this to the Danes, with the grim procession forming, we know for certain that the truth in the dying words of Laertes can be applied not merely to one episode, but to all the crime and horror of the story—

—the King, the King's to blame.
[V. ii. 320]

But when the play opens it is by no means certain that Claudius is a villain. Even when the Prince swears vengeance there is still a strong possibility that the Ghost's word ought not to be taken. What we have seen of Claudius suggests a clear conscience: we have been present whilst a very gracious and most noble-looking renaissance monarch transacted private and public business with an admiring court around him. With competence and regal assurance he disposes of the problem of young Fortinbras, sending a statesmanlike embassy to the old king. Claudius never appears to better advantage than in this scene: with what sincere interest in the affairs of a trusted adviser does he assure the young Laertes:

You cannot speak of reason to the Dane
And lose your voice. What wouldst thou beg, Laertes,
That shall not be my offer, not thy asking?
The head is not more native to the heart,
The hand more instrumental to the mouth,
Than is the throne of Denmark to thy father.
[I. ii. 44-9]

When Claudius turns to "my cousin Hamlet, and my son" [I. ii. 64], there is the same healthy assurance, tempered now with a sympathetic restraint which suggests immeasurable reserves of strength and kindliness. He seems to be justified in everything that he says to cajole or persuade Hamlet to take more interest to the incidents of everyday life.

In the face of his nephew's inability to reconcile himself to that "common theme," the "death of fathers" [I. ii. 104], Claudius seems sincere. When the Prince has promised his mother to remain, the gloriousness of Claudius is even more pronounced: now the court departs in a magnificent procession, joyfully expectant of great splendour and felicities to come, with their king proclaiming to the world a liberality and magnanimity of soul which renaissance minds found fittting to a monarch. The scene moves inevitably to his final speech; and this sets the seal on the picture which Shakespeare wants us to have of a personage whose grandeur swells more and more until at last he holds the stage, dominating the whole company with a radiant splendour:

No jocund health that Denmark drinks today
But the great cannon to the clouds shall tell,
And the King's rouse the heaven shall bruist again,
Re-speaking earthly thunder.
[I. ii. 125-28]

For Claudius, this is the moment of greatest triumph; in his appearance, in the attitude of others toward him, there is no suggestion that he is anything but an ideal king, with all the superb qualities which that implies. To look at him no one would imagine the foul crimes of which he is guilty, the murder of a brother, the filthy, animal sin of incest. Not the mark of Cain, but a clear conscience seems to show itself on Claudius' brow; he seems to emanate health and brightness of soul, and a gracious spirit of nobility. And yet as he wrote the play, Shakespeare, even as he imagined Claudius seeming so splendid, had also imagined him guilty at this very moment of two horrid, ugly crimes. A few scenes later, in the heat of his first reaction to the Ghost's tale, Hamlet cries bitterly:
Yet even Hamlet begins to wonder if what the Ghost says is true, and no ordinary mortal looking at Claudius and his loving queen, surrounded with a joyful court, a picture of all that is healthily vital in human beings, could be expected to peer beneath the smile and find the villain. We would rather be disposed to think that of the world in general it is true that "one may smile, and smile, and be a villain," but if ever there were a sure exception to that rule it is to be found in this particular case of Denmark, and of Claudius, its magnificent king.

From one point of view, then, the progress of the play is a revelation of the quality of Claudius' villainy; only gradually do we come to a true experience of his real nature. How successfully he imposes on Denmark, and how difficult it is to prevent oneself from being deceived by this kind of person, is exemplified excellently by his very first speech. The peculiar quality of this hypocrite lies in his ability not merely to hide evil, but to present it openly when he chooses, in a manner which leads ordinary people not to recognize it emotionally for what it is, but to respond to it as good. Claudius reminds his listeners that his behaviour could indeed be regarded as not in accordance with what is normally held as the best of taste:

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;
Yet so far hath discretion fought with nature
That we with wisest sorrow think on him,
Together with remembrance of ourselves.
[I. ii. 1-7]

As this scene develops, with an obviously admiring court and a loving queen, from none of whom comes any hint of shame or disapproval, it is easy to accept Claudius' words as perfectly reasonable, and to forget that he is guilty of at the least a gross breach of etiquette in marrying so soon, and in putting an end to court mourning within two months of the last king's death. In a sense which Claudius did not intend his words, "so far hath discretion fought with nature" that he has managed to marry his brother's widow without stimulating in his courtiers their normal reaction to incest; and yet in this case, too, he does not attempt to hide what he has done, he merely contrives to make the world mistake the real quality of his actions:

Therefore our sometime sister, now our queen, . . .
Have we, as 'twere with a defeated joy, . . .
Taken to wife; nor have we herein barr'd
Your better wisdoms, which have freely gone
With this affair along.
[I. ii. 8-16]

It is the measure of his uncle's success that Hamlet, the only person to react normally to an abnormal situation, is himself made to seem abnormal. The sight of Claudius, to hear him speak, is enough to dispel disapproval; and in the behaviour of Gertrude is so much love and radiance that we can be forgiven for not realizing that this is a woman who buried a beloved husband in frenzied grief a few short weeks ago. Shakespeare has presented the facts in such a way that our own normal reactions are dulled, and if we recognize later how strange it was that we had no comprehension of the true facts at this moment, we become more aware of the
evil emanating from Claudius as a part of the poet's fundamental conception of his play.

Claudius' nature, then, adds to the difficulties of Hamlet's task. After the King has betrayed himself, when the Mousetrap has been sprung, the position is rectified to a certain extent: the Prince and his only friend are now sure that the appearance of a murderer who does not look guilty is not to be weighed against the word of a Ghost which might have been false. But we, the audience, do not react correctly to The Murder of Gonzago, unless we are conscious of the kind of problem which it solves, and this means an awareness of Claudius as a hypocrite in the renaissance understanding of that term.

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, hypocrisy may be defined as:

> The assuming of a false appearance of virtue or goodness, with dissimulation of real character or inclinations, esp. in respect of religious life or beliefs; hence in general sense, dissimulation, pretence, sham.

We tend to interpret "the assuming of a false appearance" metaphorically; but the renaissance looked literally at the face and actions which in a hypocrite were by definition considered to express the opposite of the real nature within; for instance, Robert Cawdrey's Table Alphabetical (1604) states: "such a one as in his outward apparel, countenance and behaviour, pretendeth to be other than he is indeed, or a deceiver." (pp. 50-5)

It is because men are only human that hypocrites like Claudius are able to pass themselves off successfully. Only God and the evil-doer's own conscience, says the renaissance, know him as he is with certainty. "Our inward disposition is the life of our actions," [Bishop] Hall declares [in his Works, I], "according to that doth the God of Spirits judge us, while men censure according to our external motions." It is for this reason that the disguise of the hypocrite makes him so dangerous: "wicked hypocrites care not to play with God, that they may mock men." And we are assured that: "An open wicked man doth much hurt, with notorious sins; but an hypocrite doth at last more shame goodness, by seeming good" [Works, VIII]. (pp. 60-1)

Claudius dares to be both a villain and a hypocrite; his heart does not smile with his face; he is guilty of murder and incest, the smile on his face hides guilt and the planning of yet more villainy in his heart. Pericles treats a situation resembling that in Hamlet: like Claudius, Antiochus is guilty of incest and plans fresh murder; and like Claudius he dissembles: where Hamlet cries that "one may smile and smile and be a villain" [I. v. 108], Pericles comments:

> How courtesy would seem to cover sin,  
> When what is done is like an hypocrite,  
> The which is good in nothing but in sight!  
> [Pericles, I. i. 121-23]

As Hall says: "Hypocrisy gains this of men, that it may do evil unsuspected" [Works, I].

After the moment when Claudius has shown his guilt fleetingly in his face and gesture, "upon the talk of the poisoning" [III. ii. 289], there is no more doubt for Hamlet and Horatio, and for audience and reader. And up to this moment Shakespeare does not show Claudius in such a way that we know him for what he is: but once murder has spoken with miraculous organ we can see him without the disguise. Denmark, however, is still deluded; his subjects cannot peer through the smile to the guilty heart. And as a result he is able to send Hamlet away to a treacherously planned death: and even when the Prince returns, Claudius still appears to be the splendid monarch striving hard to reconcile his nephew and Laertes in a fair and generous manner.

Claudius shows himself to us as hypocrite in the use he makes of Laertes:
Laertes, was your father dear to you?
Or are you like the painting of a sorrow,
A face without a heart?
[IV. vii. 107-09]

These words are spoken by the very man who turned to chide another sorrowing son; to Hamlet, Claudius declared at the beginning of the play:

to persever
In obstinate condolement is . . .
. . . unmanly grief;
. . . Fie! 'tis a fault to heaven,
A fault against the dead, a fault to nature,
To reason most absurd; whose common theme
Is death of fathers.
[I. ii. 92-104]

Shakespeare put these sentiments into the mouth of the character whom he had imagined guilty of the murder of the man for whom such grief was being shown. The same hypocritical murderer, as he incites Laertes to yet more killing, asks:

what would you undertake
To show yourself in deed your father's son
More than in words?
[IV. vii. 124-26]

And when the answer comes: "to cut his throat i' th' church" [IV. vii. 126], Claudius approves with every show of honest sympathy and indignation, using words which are unwittingly a sentence passed on himself:

No place, indeed, should murder sanctuarize;
Revenge should have no bounds.
[IV. vii. 127-28]

Shakespeare makes Claudius a hypocrite in what he says and does as the action progresses, and when the last scene has arrived we have been able to understand the land of villainy that lurks beneath his fair and smooth appearance. It is obvious then that he has been created by the playwright as this particular kind of dangerous person, the hypocrite, who by virtue of his position and of his seeming splendour can pervert not merely his queen, but the very land which he has stolen from his victim. Claudius is not a mixture of good and bad, he is an evil man who seems good.

But it might well be objected that the King tries to pray, that he shows remorse, especially when admitting to himself the justice of the remark made by Polonius:

'Tis too much prov'd, that with devotion's visage
And pious action we do sugar o'er
The devil himself.
[III. i. 46-8]

Then Claudius admits to himself:
O, 'tis too true!
How smart a lash that speech doth give my conscience!
The harlot's cheek, beautied with plast'ring art,
Is not more ugly to the thing that helps it
Than is my deed to my most painted word.
O heavy burden!
[III. i. 48-53]

At this point the audience cannot be certain that the King's guilt involves murder of a brother, but incest and usurpation are burdens enough. Yet the trouble with Claudius from the renaissance point of view is that however smart a lash his conscience may receive, it is powerless to make him really contrite. For Elizabethans there was no more to be seen in his behaviour, especially when he tries to pray (III. iii.); nothing more than horror at the realization of the consequences of his wrongdoing. As Bishop Hall puts it: "Consciences that are without remorse, are not without horror: wickedness makes men desperate." He says this in his commentary on the story of Cain and Abel: and Claudius, who has also slain his brother, is another example of despairing wickedness.

When Claudius tries to pray he fails, because, like Faustus [in Christopher Marlowe's Dr. Faustus], he cannot bear to part with the fruits of his sinning; and as a result, in another more deadly sense, he learns to feel the full quality of those fruits as a burden round his neck, pressing him down into the swamp of hell:

"Forgive me my foul murder"!
That cannot be; since I am still possess'd
Of those effects for which I did the murder—
My crown, mine own ambition, and my queen.
May one be pardon'd and retain th' offence?
[III. iii. 52-6]

And the answer which he gives himself is in tune with what we have heard in other renaissance comments on hypocrisy:

In the corrupted currents of this world
Offence's gilded hand may shove by justice; . . .
. . . But 'tis not so above:
There is no shuffling; there the action lies
In his true nature.
[III. iii. 57-62]

But Claudius has reduced himself to a state of such depravity that in the corruption of his will his soul is limed:

that, struggling to be free,
Art more engag'd.
[III. iii. 68-9]

As he rises from his knees, having given every outward sign of penitent devotion, he seems to the sentimental modern mind to be pathetic and not all unworthy. But the Elizabethan would not necessarily have had this view: he would more likely have given a verdict more in keeping with John Bulwer's denunciation of hypocrites [in his Chirologia]:

...
Idolaters and hypocrites, in lifting up their hands in prayer, are but apes, who while they by the outward symbol profess to have their minds erected upwards, the first of them stick in the wood and stone, as if God were enclosed there: the second sort, entangled in vain cares, or wicked cogitations, lie grovelling on the earth, and by a contradiction of gesture, bear witness against themselves.

Even so does Claudius grieve, that "above," malefactors are

compell'd,
Even to the teeth and forehead of our faults,
To give in evidence.
[III. iii. 62-4]

Thus for Elizabethans the enormous extent of his guilt became more visible with his own despairing recognition:

My words fly up, my thoughts remain below.
Words without thoughts never to heaven go.
[III. iii. 97-8]

When William Lathum, in *Phylaca Lachrymarum* (1633), gives a list of the flowers fit to be thrown upon the bier of his friend, Nathaniel Weld, tulips are rejected:

No gaudy tulips here admitted be,
(Emblems of false (fair-fained) sanctity),
Whose worth all outward is in show alone,
But inward scent hath not, ne virtue none.

From one point of view, Claudius is like the "gaudy tulips," but fundamentally they are inadequate as symbols for what Shakespeare has imagined of him. The dramatist is thinking of Claudius in terms of Cain, who is associated in the Bible, not only with the murder of a brother, but with a hypocritical sacrifice which was literally a foul stench. For that reason we are reminded of Cain when Claudius exclaims in horror:

O, my offence is rank, it smells to heaven;
It hath the primal eldest curse upon 't—
A brother's murder!
[III. iii. 36-8]

This is his second reference to his biblical prototype: the first occurs in the early hypocritical reproof to Hamlet for mourning his dead father:

a fault to nature.
To reason most absurd; whose common theme
Is death of fathers, and who still hath cried
From the first corse till he that died to-day,
"This must be so."
[I. ii. 102-06]

The "first corse," Abel, was killed by his brother, Cain, in fulfilment of the primal curse; but while this is an appropriate example, I do not think its appearance here should be taken as anything more than contributory evidence of the way in which Shakespeare himself was reacting to his story; for there is direct evidence
enough later when Claudius refers openly to the nature of his own offence. It is, however, important not to
neglect the association of Claudius with Cain, for here we have an essential element in Shakespeare's
conception of the Hamlet story.

In *Shakespeare's Imagery* (1935), Professor [Carolyn F. E.] Spurgeon calls attention to the number of images
in *Hamlet* in which disease is involved:

In *Hamlet* there hovers all through the play in both words and word pictures the conception of
disease, especially of a hidden corruption infecting and destroying a wholesome body.

Professor Spurgeon suggests that the reason for this lies in the author's having imagined Hamlet as infected
and killed by disease of the spirit: she believes that the imagery of this play suggests that Hamlet's tragedy is
the result of

a condition for which the individual himself is apparently not responsible any more than the
sick man is to blame for the infection which strikes and devours him.

But the Elizabethans knew of a form of sickness for which there was no doubt that the sick man was himself
to blame, and that was hypocrisy. Where Professor Spurgeon has assumed that the imagery of disease
expresses Shakespeare's attitude to Hamlet, there are stronger grounds for suggesting that the hidden
corruption which hovers all through the play emanates from the central conception of Claudius and the part
which he occupies in the story as a whole. It is here that we perceive the importance of the association with
Cain; for not only did Cain slay his brother, like Claudius, and is known for the foulness of his sacrifice, but
Cain like Claudius was a hypocrite. Moreover, the renaissance, with the authority of Holy Writ, often speaks
of hypocrisy itself as an inner corruption, a conception which we have retained with the term "whited
sepulchre." Claudius' mention of his "rank" offence, just before his useless show of prayer, should be
imagined in the light of the distinction made by Hall between sin and penitence:

There is no sense, that gives so lively a refreshing to the spirits, as that of smelling: no smell
can yield so true and feeling delight to the sense, as the offerings of our penitence, obedience,
praise, send up into the nostrils of the Almighty. [*Works*, V]

But sins, he adds, are unsavoury: "no carrion is so noisome." (pp. 62-8)

It is not strange that the world in which Claudius flourishes should be seen by Hamlet in its true light as

an unweeded garden
That grows to seed; things rank and gross in nature
Possess it merely.
[I. ii. 135-371]

And "rank" is the word which Claudius himself uses of his offence.

When Hamlet breaks away and follows the Ghost, Horatio asks: "To what issue will this come?" And
Marcellus gives the right answer: "Something is rotten in the state of Denmark" [I. iv. 89-90]. But what
neither of them can yet realize is that the rottenness lies at the heart of the country, its king. We cannot
understand fully what Hamlet has to fight unless we realize that the triumph of Claudius means spiritual death
for Denmark. No wonder that he himself describes his subjects as:

muddied.
Thick and unwholesome in their thoughts and whispers.
And so it must be until the foul deed, never hidden from the sight of God, has risen to the eyes of men, and the cause, the core of corruption, the seemingly fine king, has been removed.

This view of Claudius becomes even more justified if we consider yet another aspect of the hypocrite as conceived of in the renaissance: he is not only rotten, he is devilish. Hall describes how when a hypocrite meets a friend in the street, "the other thinks he reads his heart in his face," and rejoices at receiving a vague invitation which will never materialize into hospitality: and in his heart all the time the hypocrite mocks:

In brief, he is the stranger's saint; the neighbour's disease; the blot of goodness; a rotten stick, in a dark night; a poppy, in a cornfield; an ill tempered candle, with a great snuff, that in going out smells ill; an angel abroad, a devil at home; and worse when an angel than when a devil.

Another devil of this kind to whom Shakespeare gave a central part is Angelo in Measure for Measure. In each play the situation is similar: a hypocrite rules in each. Isabella finds that it would be useless to

tell the world
Aloud what man thou art.
[Measure for Measure, II. iv. 153-54]

Angelo sneers triumphantly:

Say what you can: my false o'erweighs your true.
[II. iv. 170]

And the Duke sums up as he moralizes in a string of couplets at the end of the Third Act:

O, what may man within him hide,
Though Angel on the outward side!
[III. ii. 271-72]

In Measure for Measure the audience can appreciate the truth of this at once: from what has been shown of Angelo we recognize that Isabella is not mistaken in her words to her brother:

This outward-sainted deputy
. . . is yet a devil;
His filth within being cast, he would appear
A pond as deep as hell.
[III. i. 88-93]

The ordinary kind of devil is black within and black without: that is why Thomas Adams followed Martin Luther in applying the term "White Devil" to a hypocrite: "A devil he was," writes Adams of Judas, "black within and full of rancour, but white without, and skinned over with hypocrisy; therefore to use Luther's word, we will call him the white devil' [The White Devil, or the Hypocrite Uncased].

Claudius shows so white that it takes half a play before we know him for what he is, and a second half before anyone is in a position to unmask him in public. Much of the horror of the situation with which Hamlet is confronted lies in the certainty that in virtue of his "seeming," Claudius can continue to impose on the world. In Measure for Measure, the Duke has retired, but only temporarily: in Hamlet the king has been murdered,
and everything lies at the murderer's feet. Isabella can cry in public to her legitimate ruler:

    do not banish reason
    For inequality; but let your reason serve
    To make the truth appear where it seems hid,
    And hide the false seems true.
[V. i. 64-7]

But there is no one to whom Hamlet can make this appeal; even his own friends and well-wishers are, without knowing it, at the usurper's disposal. Again, when Isabella is at first unsuccessful in her supplication to the Duke, she comforts herself with the apostrophe:

    O, you blessed ministers above,
    Keep me in patience; and, with ripened time,
    Unfold the evil which is here wrapt up
    In countenance!
[V. i. 115-18]

But Hamlet must not delay, he cannot afford to wait for time to "unfold the evil" which is here "wrapt up" in Claudius' countenance.

In Isabella's speech, Shakespeare has used the image of wrapping and unfolding in association with a countenance: in *Hamlet* he concentrates on the smile into which a face folds when it covers villainy: but in *Titus Andronicus*, that early play, he combines the two. There the word "fold" means not only "wrap," but "cover," "protect," "conceal," with the suggestion of "crease," ending in the concrete "smile." Tamora is made to wonder greatly

    that man's face can fold
    In pleasing smiles such murderous tyranny.
[Titus Andronicus, II. iii. 266-67]

And crude as *Titus Andronicus* undoubtedly is, the situation there is nevertheless not so different from what we have in *Hamlet*, in each play deceit seems to triumph, the normal ways in which murder may be denounced are frustrated. Where Hamlet must say nothing, the opponents of evil in the Roman play lose tongues and hands, the symbols and "adjuncts" of expression, in each play a smile hides villainy, and in each, murder speaks at last with most miraculous organ.

To read *Pericles, Measure for Measure, The Merchant of Venice* and *Titus Andronicus* is to find that whenever Shakespeare deals with the elements which for him are present in the story of Hamlet, he reacts in the same way, stressing the contrast between inside and outside, linking apparent health with hidden corruption, the seeming angelic with the actual diabolic. Centuries earlier, *The Proverbs of Alfred* had observed:

    Mony appel is bryht with-ute
    And Bitter with-inne.

The early Middle English Lambeth Homily declares that the hypocrite is "al swa is an eppel iheoweth. he bith with-uten feire and frakel with-innen"— "like a rosy apple, fair without and rotten within." And the tradition went on into Shakespeare's own day.
In this tradition Claudius can be viewed in the right perspective, not as an unfortunate mixture of good and bad qualities, but as an example of how utterly corruption can pass itself off as good, an example who makes the
words of Antonio in *Twelfth Night* ring true:

Virtue is beauty; but the beauteous evil
Are empty trunks o'erflourish'd by the devil.

[*Twelfth Night*, III. iv. 369-70]

If anyone objects today that to take Claudius thus is to reduce him from a credible human being, a mixture of good and bad in tragedy, to an impossible puppet, a villain who fits nothing but melodrama, only one reply can be given. Shakespeare's age believed that people of this sort actually existed, and that tragedy was often the outcome of their success in deception. And if it be objected further that this is thrusting Shakespeare back into his age, the reply is that he wrote for that age, and that his plays could have succeeded in the theatre only if they had been intelligible to his contemporaries, offering them situations and ideas which were familiar to the early seventeenth century. For Shakespeare's contemporaries, Claudius as a hypocrite in their sense of the word was no caricature. To say that one could smile and be a villain was to express a deep truth which goes right into the nature of things in a world which has suffered a fall; and for the renaissance that was the world of all who came after Adam. To read into Hamlet's words nothing more than a picturesque statement that Claudius is not to be trusted would be to blind ourselves to a great part of Shakespeare's vision of this particular battle between good and evil as involved in the continual struggle of Satan to assert himself. Only when we are prepared to consider Claudius as an overwhelmingly evil person, whose seeming is the opposite of his being, are we able to appreciate how his creator has organized the elements of the story of the Prince of Denmark into a shape which awakens an understanding of what was to the renaissance mind a true comment on the place of evil in the world. (pp. 68-73)

Source: Bertram Joseph, "—The King, the King's to Blame," in his *Conscience and the King: A Study of "Hamlet,"* Chatto and Windus, 1953, pp. 50-73.

**Criticism: Gertrude**

Carolyn Heilbrun

*[Hellbrun contends that, contrary to the predominant critical opinion, Gertrude is not a weak character who lacks "depth and vigorous intelligence." The critic then evaluates Gertrude's lines in Hamlet to demonstrate that while the queen is not "profound," she is certainly never "silly." The character's actions in fact reveal her to be clear-headed and courageous, especially during the closet scene in Act III, scene iv when, after Hamlet accuses her of lust, she accepts his judgment and admits her sin. Heilbrun also provides an Elizabethan definition of the term "adultery," asserting that the word does not necessarily imply that Claudius and Gertrude had an affair while King Hamlet was alive, rather it suggests that their marriage reflects an unchaste sexual relationship. The critic concludes that while Gertrude is indeed lustful, she is also "intelligent, penetrating, and gifted with a remarkable talent for concise and pithy speech."]

The character of Hamlet's mother has not received the specific critical attention it deserves. Moreover, the traditional account of her personality as rendered by the critics will not stand up under close scrutiny of Shakespeare's play.

None of the critics of course has failed to see Gertrude as vital to the action of the play; not only is she the mother of the hero, the widow of the Ghost, and the wife of the current King of Denmark, but the fact of her hasty and, to the Elizabethans, incestuous marriage, the whole question of her "falling off", occupies a position of barely secondary importance in the mind of her son, and of the Ghost. Indeed, Freud and Jones see
her [see excerpt in section on Hamlet's character], the object of Hamlet's Oedipus complex, as central to the motivation of the play. But the critics, with no exception that I have been able to find, have accepted Hamlet's word "frailty" as applying to her whole personality, and have seen in her not one weakness, or passion in the Elizabethan sense, but a character of which weakness and lack of depth and vigorous intelligence are the entire explanation. Of her can it truly be said that carrying the "stamp of one defect", she did "in the general censure take corruption from that particular fault" [I. iv. 35-6].

The critics are agreed that Gertrude was not a party to the late King's murder and indeed knew nothing of it, a point which on the clear evidence of the play, is indisputable. They have also discussed whether or not Gertrude, guilty of more than an "o'er-hasty marriage" [II. ii. 57], had committed adultery with Claudius before her husband's death. I will return to this point later on. Beyond discussing these two points, those critics who have dealt specifically with the Queen have traditionally seen her as well-meaning but shallow and feminine, in the pejorative sense of the word: incapable of any sustained rational process, superficial and flighty. It is this tradition which a closer reading of the play will show to be erroneous.

Professor [A.C.] Bradley describes the traditional Gertrude thus [in his Shakespearean Tragedy]:

The Queen was not a bad-hearted woman, not at all the woman to think little of murder. But she had a soft animal nature and was very dull and very shallow. She loved to be happy, like a sheep in the sun, and to do her justice, it pleased her to see others happy, like more sheep in the sun. . . . It was pleasant to sit upon her throne and see smiling faces around her, and foolish and unkind in Hamlet to persist in grieving for his father instead of marrying Ophelia and making everything comfortable. . . . The belief at the bottom of her heart was that the world is a place constructed simply that people may be happy in it in a good-humored sensual fashion.

Later on, Bradley says of her that when affliction comes to her "the good in her nature struggles to the surface through the heavy mass of sloth."

[Harley] Granville-Barker is not quite so extreme. Shakespeare, he says [in his Prefaces to Shakespeare],

gives us in Gertrude the woman who does not mature, who clings to her youth and all that belongs to it, whose charm will not change but at last fade and wither; a pretty creature, as we see her, desperately refusing to grow old. . . . She is drawn for us with unemphatic strokes, and she has but a passive part in the play's action. She moves throughout in Claudius' shadow; he holds her as he won her, by the witchcraft of his wit.

Elsewhere Granville-Barker says "Gertrude who will certainly never see forty-five again, might better be 'old'. (That is, portrayed by an older, mature actress.) But that would make her relations with Claudius—and their likelihood is vital to the play—quite incredible." Granville-Barker is saying here that a woman about forty-five years of age cannot feel any sexual passion nor arouse it. This is one of the mistakes which lie at the heart of the misunderstanding about Gertrude.

Professor [John] Dover Wilson sees Gertrude as more forceful than either of these two critics will admit, but even he finds the Ghost's unwillingness to shock her with knowledge of his murder to be one of the basic motivations of the play, and he says of her "Gertrude is always hoping for the best" [What Happens in Hamlet].

Now whether Claudius won Gertrude before or after her husband's death, it was certainly not, as Granville-Barker implies, with "the witchcraft of his wit" alone. Granville-Barker would have us believe that Claudius won her simply by the force of his persuasive tongue. "It is plain", he writes, that the Queen "does
little except echo his [Claudius'] wishes; sometimes—as in the welcome to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern—she repeats his very words," though Wilson must admit later that Gertrude does not tell Claudius everything. Without dwelling here on the psychology of the Ghost, or the greater burden borne by the Elizabethan words "witchcraft" and "wit", we can plainly see, for the Ghost tells us, how Claudius won the Queen: the Ghost considers his brother to be garbage, and "lust", the Ghost says, "will sate itself in a celestial bed and prey on garbage" [I. v. 55-7]. "Lust"—in a woman of forty-five or more—is the key word here. Bradley, Granville-Barker, and to a lesser extent Professor Dover Wilson, misunderstand Gertrude largely because they are unable to see lust, the desire for sexual relations, as the passion, in the Elizabethan sense of the word, the flaw, the weakness which drives Gertrude to an incestuous marriage, appals her son, and keeps him from the throne. Unable to explain her marriage to Claudius as the act of any but a weak-minded vacillating woman, they fail to see Gertrude for the strong-minded, intelligent, succinct, and, apart from this passion, sensible woman that she is.

To understand Gertrude properly, it is only necessary to examine the lines Shakespeare has chosen for her to say. She is, except for her description of Ophelia's death, concise and pithy in speech, with a talent for seeing the essence of every situation presented before her eyes. If she is not profound, she is certainly never silly. We first hear her asking Hamlet to stop wearing black, to stop walking about with his eyes downcast, and to realize that death is an inevitable part of life. She is, in short, asking him not to give way to the passion of grief, a passion of whose force and dangers the Elizabethans were aware. . . . Claudius echoes her with a well-reasoned argument against grief which was, in its philosophy if not in its language, a piece of commonplace Elizabethan lore. After Claudius' speech, Gertrude asks Hamlet to remain in Denmark, where he is rightly loved. Her speeches have been short, however warm and loving, and conciseness of statement is not the mark of a dull and shallow woman.

We next hear her, as Queen and gracious hostess, welcoming Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to the court, hoping, with the King, that they may cheer Hamlet and discover what is depressing him. Claudius then tells Gertrude, when they are alone, that Polonius believes he knows what is upsetting Hamlet. The Queen answers:

I doubt it is no other than the main,
His father's death and our o'er-hasty marriage.
[II. ii. 56-7]

This statement is concise, remarkably to the point, and not a little courageous. It is not the statement of a dull, slothful woman who can only echo her husband's words. Next, Polonius enters with his most unbrief apotheosis to brevity. The Queen interrupts him with five words: "More matter with less art" [II. ii. 95]. It would be difficult to find a phrase more applicable to Polonius. When this gentleman, in no way deterred from his loquacity, after purveying the startling news that he has a daughter, begins to read a letter, the Queen asks pointedly "Came this from Hamlet to her?" [II. ii. 114].

We see Gertrude next in Act III, asking Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, with her usual directness, if Hamlet received them well, and if they were able to tempt him to any pastime. But before leaving the room, she stops for a word of kindness to Ophelia. It is a humane gesture, for she is unwilling to leave Ophelia, the unhappy tool of the King and Polonius, without some kindly and intelligent appreciation of her help:

And for your part, Ophelia, I do wish
That your good beauties be the happy cause
Of Hamlet's wildness. So shall I hope your virtues
Will bring him to his wonted way again,
To both your honors.
[III. i. 37-41]
It is difficult to see in this speech, as Bradley apparently does, the gushing shallow wish of a sentimental woman that class distinctions shall not stand in the way of true love.

At the play, the Queen asks Hamlet to sit near her. She is clearly trying to make him feel he has a place in the court of Denmark. She does not speak again until Hamlet asks her how she likes the play. "The lady doth protest too much, methinks" [III. ii. 230] is her immortal comment on the player queen. The scene gives her four more words: when Claudius leaps to his feet, she asks "How fares my Lord?" [III. ii. 267].

I will for the moment pass over the scene in the Queen's closet, to follow her quickly through the remainder of the play. After the closet scene, the Queen comes to speak to Claudius. She tells him, as Hamlet has asked her to, that he, Hamlet, is mad, and has killed Polonius. She adds, however, that he now weeps for what he has done. She does not wish Claudius to know what she now knows, how wild and fearsome Hamlet has become. Later, she does not wish to see Ophelia, but hearing how distracted she is, consents. When Laertes bursts in ready to attack Claudius, she immediately steps between Claudius and Laertes to protect the King, and tells Laertes it is not Claudius who has killed his father. Laertes will of course soon learn this, but it is Gertrude who manages to tell him before he can do any meaningless damage. She leaves Laertes and the King together, and then returns to tell Laertes that his sister is drowned. She gives her news directly, realizing that suspense will increase the pain of it, but this is the one time in the play when her usual pointed conciseness would be the mark neither of intelligence nor kindness, and so, gently, and at some length, she tells Laertes of his sister's death, giving him time to recover from the shock of grief, and to absorb the meaning of her words. At Ophelia's funeral the Queen scatters flowers over the grave:

Sweets to the sweet; farewell!
I hop'd thou shouldst have been my Hamlet's wife.
I thought thy bride-bed to have deck'd, sweet maid,
And not t' have strew'd thy grave.
[V. i. 243-46]

She is the only one present decently mourning the death of someone young, and not heated in the fire of some personal passion.

At the match between Hamlet and Laertes, the Queen believes that Hamlet is out of training, but glad to see him at some sport, she gives him her handkerchief to wipe his brow, and drinks to his success. The drink is poisoned and she dies. But before she dies she does not waste time on vituperation; she warns Hamlet that the drink is poisoned to prevent his drinking it. They are her last words. Those critics who have thought her stupid admire her death; they call it uncharacteristic.

In Act III, when Hamlet goes to his mother in her closet his nerves are pitched at the very height of tension; he is on the edge of hysteria. The possibility of murdering his mother has in fact entered his mind, and he has just met and refused an opportunity to kill Claudius. His mother, meanwhile, waiting for him, has told Polonius not to fear for her, but she knows when she sees Hamlet that he may be violently mad. Hamlet quips with her, insults her, tells her he wishes she were not his mother, and when she, still retaining dignity, attempts to end the interview, Hamlet seizes her and she cries for help. The important thing to note is that the Queen's cry "Thou wilt not murder me" [III. iv. 21 ] is not foolish. She has seen from Hamlet's demeanor that he is capable of murder, as indeed in the next instant he proves himself to be.

We next learn from the Queen's startled "As kill a king" [III. iv. 30] that she has no knowledge of the murder, though of course this is only confirmation here of what we already know. Then the Queen asks Hamlet why he is so hysterical:
What have I done, that thou dar'st wag thy tongue
In noise so rude against me?
[III. iv. 39-40]

Hamlet tells her: it is her lust, the need of sexual passion, which has driven her from the arms and memory of her husband to the incomparably cruder charms of his brother. He cries out that she has not even the excuse of youth for her lust:

O Shame! where is thy blush? Rebellious hell,
If thou canst mutine in a matron's bones,
To flaming youth let virtue be as wax
And melt in her own fire. Proclaim no shame
When the compulsive ardor gives the charge,
Since frost itself as actively doth burn,
And reason panders will.
[III. iv. 81-8]

This is not only a lust, but a lust which throws out of joint all the structure of human morality and relationships. And the Queen admits it. If there is one quality that has characterized, and will characterize, every speech of Gertrude's in the play, it is the ability to see reality clearly, and to express it. This talent is not lost when turned upon herself:

O Hamlet, speak no more!
Thou turn'st mine eyes into my very soul,
And there I see such black and grained spots
As will not leave their tinct.
[III. iv. 88-91]

She knows that lust has driven her, that this is her sin, and she admits it. Not that she wishes to linger in the contemplation of her sin. No more, she cries, no more. And then the Ghost appears to Hamlet. The Queen thinks him mad again—as well she might—but she promises Hamlet that she will not betray him—and she does not.

Where, in all that we have seen of Gertrude, is there the picture of "a soft animal nature, very dull and very shallow?" She may indeed be "animal" in the sense of "lustful". But it does not follow that because she wishes to continue a life of sexual experience, her brain is soft or her wit unperceptive.

Some critics, having accepted Gertrude as a weak and vacillating woman, see no reason to suppose that she did not fall victim to Claudius' charms before the death of her husband and commit adultery with him. These critics, Professor Bradley among them, claim that the elder Hamlet clearly tells his son that Gertrude has committed adultery with Claudius in the speech beginning "Ay that incestuous, that adulterate beast" [I. v. 41ff.] Professor Dover Wilson presents the argument:

Is the Ghost speaking here of the o'er-hasty marriage of Claudius and Gertrude? Assuredly not. His "certain term" is drawing rapidly to an end, and he is already beginning to "scent the morning air." Hamlet knew of the marriage, and his whole soul was filled with nausea at the thought of the speedy hasting to "incestuous sheets." Why then should the Ghost waste precious moments in telling Hamlet what he was fully cognisant of before? . . . Moreover, though the word "incestuous" was applicable to the marriage, the rest of the passage is entirely inapplicable to it. Expressions like "witchcraft", "traitorous gifts", "seduce", "shameful lust", and "seeming virtuous" may be noted in passing. But the rest of the quotation
leaves no doubt upon the matter. . . .

Professor Dover Wilson and other critics have accepted the Ghost's word "adulterate" in its modern meaning. The Elizabethan word "adultery", however, was not restricted to its modern meaning, but was used to define any sexual relationship which could be called unchaste, including of course an incestuous one. Certainly the elder Hamlet considered the marriage of Claudius and Gertrude to be unchaste and unseemly, and while his use of the word "adulterate" indicates his very strong feelings about the marriage, it would not to an Elizabethan audience necessarily mean that he believed Gertrude to have been false to him before his death. It is important to notice, too, that the Ghost does not apply the term "adulterate" to Gertrude, and he may well have considered the term a just description of Claudius' entire sexual life.

But even if the Ghost used the word "adulterate" in full awareness of its modern restricted meaning, it is not necessary to assume on the basis of this single speech (and it is the only shadow of evidence we have for such a conclusion) that Gertrude was unfaithful to him while he lived. It is quite probable that the elder Hamlet still considered himself married to Gertrude, and he is moreover revolted that her lust for him ("why she would hang on him as if increase of appetite had grown by what it fed on" [I. ii. 143-44]) should have so easily transferred itself to another. This is why he uses the expressions "seduce", "shameful lust", and others. Professor Dover Wilson has himself said "Hamlet knew of the marriage, and his whole soul was filled with nausea at the thought of the speedy hasting to incestuous sheets"; the soul of the elder Hamlet was undoubtedly filled with nausea too, and this could well explain his using such strong language, as well as his taking the time to mention the matter at all. It is not necessary to consider Gertrude an adulteress to account for the speech of the Ghost.

Gertrude's lust was, of course, more important to the plot than we may at first perceive. Charlton Lewis, among others, has shown how Shakespeare kept many of the facts of the plots from which he borrowed without maintaining the structures which explained them. In the original Belleforest story, Gertrude (substituting Shakespeare's more familiar names) was daughter of the king; to become king, it was necessary to marry her. The elder Hamlet, in marrying Gertrude, ousted Claudius from the throne. Shakespeare retained the shell of this in his play. When she no longer has a husband, the form of election would be followed to declare the next king, in this case undoubtedly her son Hamlet. By marrying Gertrude, Claudius "popp'd in between th' election and my hopes" [V. ii. 65], that is, kept young Hamlet from the throne. Gertrude's flaw of lust made Claudius' ambition possible, for without taking advantage of the Queen's desire still to be married, he could not have been king.

But Gertrude, if she is lustful, is also intelligent, penetrating, and gifted with a remarkable talent for concise and pithy speech. In all the play, the person whose language hers most closely resembles is Horatio. "Sweets to the sweet," she has said at Ophelia's grave [V. i. 243], "Good night sweet prince", Horatio says at the end [V. ii. 359]. They are neither of them dull, or shallow, or slothful, though one of them is passion's slave. (pp. 201-06)


Baldwin Maxwell

[Maxwell takes exception to Carolyn Heilbrun's reading of Gertrude as a strong and intelligent character (see excerpt above) and provides a scene-by-scene analysis of the queen to prove that she is highly dependent on, and manipulated by, Claudius. The critic maintains that because Gertrude has generally fewer lines than the other characters with whom she interacts, principally Claudius and Hamlet, she is at best a minor force in the play. Maxwell also compares the queen to her counterpart in the Belleforest version of Hamlet, one of the chief sources for Shakespeare's tragedy. Unlike Shakespeare's queen, the critic observes, the Gertrude of the]
Belleforest account is "neither weak nor neutral." Maxwell then presents examples of the queen's ineffectuality; when Gertrude describes her marriage as merely "o'er-hasty," she does not recognize the union as adulterous or incestuous because she has been duped by Claudius's charm to accept it as normal; and, during the closet scene when she asks Hamlet "What shall I do?" (III. iv. 180), she further demonstrates her lack of initiative because she needs to depend on others for guidance. Perhaps the most startling evidence of Gertrude's pronounced dependence, the critic continues, is that she submissively remains with Claudius after Hamlet has told her of the king's crimes. Maxwell further contends that Gertrude's first independent act occurs when she defies Claudius and drinks from the poisoned cup, but "her crossing him means her death."

In an article entitled "The Character of Hamlet's Mother" [see excerpt above], Miss Carolyn Heilbrun expressed strong disagreement with what had been the generally accepted estimate of Queen Gertrude. Seemingly unaware of the essay by Professor [John W.] Draper [in his The Hamlet of Shakespeare's Audience], the Queen's most ardent defender, Miss Heilbrun wrote that "critics, with no exception that I have been able to find, have accepted Hamlet's word 'frailty' as applying to [Gertrude's] whole personality, and have seen in her . . . a character of which weakness and lack of depth and rigorous intelligence are the entire explanation." She, as had Professor Draper, rejected almost in toto the views of such critics as A. C. Bradley, Miss Agnes Mackenzie, H. Granville-Barker, and others who had declared the Queen "weak", "neutral", or "little more than a puppet".

Professor Draper, who thought Gertrude innocent of adultery prior to King Hamlet's death, not only denied her weakness but excused her hasty and incestuous marriage as politically necessary because of a national crisis, "a marriage more of convenience than of love." To him the Queen appeared "dignified, gracious, and resourceful", one who "as a wife, as a mother, as a queen . . . seems to approximate, if not the Elizabethan ideal, at least the Elizabethan norm". She is, he insisted, "no slave to lust." It is only on this last point that Miss Heilbrun and Professor Draper markedly disagreed. Although persuaded that Gertrude was innocent of adultery prior to the elder Hamlet's death, Miss Heilbrun argued that her marriage to Claudius was brought about not by a need to settle a national crisis, not by the witchcraft of Claudius' wit, but by lust alone, "the need of sexual passion" in her widowhood. Apart from this passion, the Queen is, Miss Heilbrun believed, a "strongminded, intelligent, succinct, and . . . sensible woman", who is, except for her description of Ophelia's death, "concise and pithy in speech, with a talent for seeing the essence of every situation presented before her eyes."

This view of the Queen's character is at such variance with that previously current that one may wish to reexamine her appearances in the play, scene by scene, for light upon the impression Shakespeare sought to create. Little time is needed to do so, for however important the part of the Queen in the story of Hamlet, her role in the play is definitely subordinate. She appears in ten of the play's twenty scenes, but in those ten scenes she speaks fewer lines than does Ophelia, who appears in only five; and, unlike Ophelia, the Queen is never the central or dominant figure on the stage. She speaks but one brief aside and never the concluding line of a scene. To be sure, a gifted actress may, by clever stage business and a gracious manner, provide for the role an illusion of importance; but this importance is not supported by the lines she speaks and presumably was not purposed by Shakespeare.

Practically all recent critics have agreed that Gertrude was not only innocent of complicity in the murder of her first husband but wholly unaware of it. That she was, however, guilty of an "o'erhasty [second] marriage" [II. ii. 57], she herself testifies. Nor is it permissible to see that marriage as other than incestuous. The one sin of which the Queen has been accused but of which her guilt may be debatable is that she had been Claudius' mistress while the elder Hamlet was alive.

When in I. ii, the Queen appears on stage for the first time, the audience has heard nothing whatsoever about her. It is prejudiced neither in her favor nor against her. She doubtless enters on the arm of King Claudius, who directs his ingratiating smile towards her during part of the remarkable speech with which the scene
opens and from which we learn that he, having shortly before lost a brother, has recently taken to wife his brother's widow. Incest, to be sure—a horrible sin in the eyes of both church and state. But with such consummate skill has the King's speech been phrased that all on the crowded stage—or at least all but one—show neither shock nor disapproval. As a result the audience may naturally assume that the general satisfaction should outweigh the displeasure of one individual, and, in the absence of other details, accept the unusual marriage—at least for the time being—as an act which may well be shown to be both wise and—under the circumstances—permissible.

After the King has explained the present situation and expressed "For all, our thanks" [I. ii. 16], the Queen, apart perhaps from a smile, offers no word of thanks for herself. She remains silent as the King instructs the departing ambassadors and questions Laertes and Polonius on the former's desire to return to France. Gertrude is the last to speak. Upon Hamlet's bitter punning reply to the King,

\[
\text{Not so, my lord. I am too much in the sun,} \\
[I. ii. 67]
\]

the Queen makes her first speech—six lines, one of the three longest she speaks in the entire play. She urges Hamlet to "look like a friend on Denmark", to cease mourning for his father since

\[
\text{Thou know'st 'tis common. All that lives must die,} \\
\text{Passing through nature to eternity.} \\
[I. ii. 69, 72-3]
\]

That she misunderstands Hamlet's reply to her cliché, "Ay madam, it is common", is shown by her then asking

\[
\text{If it be,} \\
\text{Why seems it so particular with thee?—} \\
[I. ii. 74-5]
\]

indicative not only that she has herself ceased to mourn her late husband's death but as well that she completely fails to understand her son. After Hamlet's answer, the King, his composure recovered, quickly speaks thirty-one lines, ending with the wish that Hamlet remain at Elsinore. This wish the Queen now seconds in her third and last speech of the scene:

\[
\text{Let not thy mother lose her prayers, Hamlet.} \\
\text{I pray thee stay with us, go not to Wittenberg.} \\
[I. ii. 118-19]
\]

Nine lines later all exeunt save Hamlet.

Such is the Queen's part on her first appearance. She speaks slightly over nine lines in her three speeches—nine lines to the King's ninety-four. Her speeches are short but hardly seem more "concise and pithy" than speech in dramatic verse normally is. Nor do they, composed as they are of a cliché, a misunderstanding, and an echo, encourage the view that she is a "resourceful", "strong-minded" woman, "with a talent for seeing the essence of every situation presented before her eyes". Perhaps, too, her obedient rising at the King's "Madam, come", suggests her domination by him. Such a suggestion is supported by her leaving the stage in three later scenes upon similar words from the King ("Come, Gertrude", IV. i; "Let's follow, Gertrude", IV. vii; "Sweet Gertrude, leave us", III. i) and by her only once speaking as she makes her exit.

Such is our introduction to Queen Gertrude. So much do we know about her when Hamlet later in the scene, in his first soliloquy, expresses his disgust that his mother
A little month, or ere those shoes were old
With which she followed my poor father's body
Like Niobe, all tears, why she, even she—
O God, a beast that wants discourse of reason
Would have mourned longer—married with mine uncle,
My father's brother. . . .
O, most wicked speed, to post
With such dexterity to incestuous sheets!
[I. ii. 147-57]

That unusual marriage, upon which we had earlier in the scene passed no verdict, we now begin to question. But Hamlet is only one; the court as a whole had seemed neither to disapprove of the marriage nor to condemn its haste. Yet Hamlet's view, as we are soon to learn, is not peculiar to him, does not spring from thwarted ambition or from an excess of filial affection for his mother. Before we again see Queen Gertrude we are to hear another witness, one eminently qualified to judge her. Three scenes later the Ghost of the dead king is to inform Hamlet that his uncle,

. . . that incestuous, that adulterate beast,
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. . . .
But virtue, as it never will be moved,
Though lewdness court it in the shape of heaven,
So lust, though to a radiant angel linked,
Will sate itself in a celestial bed
And prey on garbage.
[I. v. 41-57]

Surely we are not now likely to attribute Gertrude's quietness during her earlier appearance either to remorse for her o'erhasty marriage or to an awareness that her former husband was to her present as "Hyperion to a satyr" [I. ii. 140].

But, one may ask, is the Ghost a wholly disinterested witness? Are we to accept everything he relates? Does he really know whereof he speaks? To the accuracy of his knowledge of the present and the future, I must return later, but I think it can hardly be contested that we are to assume that he has, from his vantage point beyond the grave, learned specifically all that concerned his murder. He was asleep when the poison was poured into his ear, and the dumb-show of the play-within-the-play—though that at best is only Hamlet's interpretation of what the Ghost had revealed—does not show him as awakening before he died. Yet, be it noted, the Ghost reveals not only the identity of the murderer and the instant effect which the poison had upon him but, even more remarkable, the very poison used—the "juice of cursed hebona" [I. v. 62]. Further, the King's reaction to the play-within-the-play confirms the Ghost's account of the murder in every detail. Must we not assume, therefore, that every other revelation of the past which the Ghost gives is equally accurate: that Claudius,

With witchcraft of his wit, with traitorous gifts
. . . won to his shameful lust
The will of [the] most seeming-virtuous queen.
[I. v. 42-6]
Miss Heilbrun, who thinks Gertrude had not been Claudius' mistress, denies that Claudius had won her by the witchcraft of his wit. The real reason Gertrude had entered upon her hasty second marriage, Miss Heilbrun claimed, was given by the Ghost later in the same speech:

But virtue, as it never will be moved,
Though lewdness court it in the shape of heaven,
So lust, though to a radiant angel linked,
Will sate itself in a celestial bed
And prey on garbage.
[I. v. 53-7]

But if we accept as true one part of the Ghost's speech, must we not accept the other also? And do not the last three lines quoted above suggest a violation of the marriage vows? That they were intended to do so is evidenced by the Ghost's having protested in the same speech, in lines immediately preceding, that his

. . . love was of that dignity
That it went hand in hand even with the vow
I made to her in marriage;
[I. v. 48-50]

and that Hamlet understood the Ghost's words as indicating Gertrude's adultery is shown by his charging her in the Closet Scene with

Such an act
That blurs the grace and blush of modesty,
. . . makes marriage vows
As false as dicers' oaths.
[III. iv. 40-5]

So much, then, do we learn of Gertrude in Act I. On these lines must be based the original impression Shakespeare wished to give us. It is interesting and, I suspect, significant that a very large part of what we have so far learned of Gertrude and Claudius represents modification or elaboration by Shakespeare of what is found in Belleforest's account. There, of course, Gertrude is neither weak nor neutral. Although she is not said to have participated in planning the murder of her husband, she was an accomplice after the murder, for she did not deny her lover's claim that it was in defence of her that he had slain his brother. Where, asked Belleforest, would one find "a more wicked and bold woman?" Such a question would never be asked by one writing of the Gertrude of the play. Her character Shakespeare has decidedly softened, even though in the play she appears guilty on every count cited by Belleforest except that of giving support to a false account of her husband's slaying. Shakespeare has softened her character not only by making her ignorant of the murder of her husband but by elaborating, in a way most effective upon the stage, that artful craft of Claudius as reported in Belleforest's account. There the murderer "covered his boldnesse and wicked practise with so great subtillitie and policie, and under the vaile of meere simplicitie . . . that his sinne found excuse among the common people, and of the nobilitie was esteemed for justice". Claudius' persuasive cunning is further suggested by Belleforest's observing that Gertrude, "as soone as she once gave eare to [her husband's brother], forgot both the ranke she helde . . . and the dutie of an honest wife". To portray this smooth persuasiveness and subtle craft the dramatist introduced a brilliant dramatic touch for which there is no suggestion in Belleforest—the ingratiating smiling which leads Hamlet to declare Claudius a "smiling damned villain", and to cry out:

My tables—meet it is I set it down
That one may smile, and smile, and be a villain.
At least I am sure it may be so in Denmark.
[I. v. 106-09]

So much for Act I. The Queen next appears in II. ii. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern have been summoned to spy upon Hamlet, and Gertrude's first two speeches merely echo in fewer words the welcome given them by the King. With one exception her five remaining speeches in this scene are of one line or less, most of them designed to break and give a semblance of dialogue to Polonius' artful narration. The one exception is a speech of two lines in reply to the King's reporting to her that Polonius claims to have found

The head and source of all your son's distemper.
[II. ii. 55]

The Queen replies:

I doubt it is no other but the main,
His father's death, and our o'erhasty marriage.
[II. ii. 56-7]

This speech, which some critics (mistakenly, I think) have seen as evidence that the Queen's conscience is already troubled, Miss Heilbrun pronounced "concise, remarkably to the point, and not a little courageous." One could the more readily agree with her had Gertrude omitted the word "o'erhasty". When the King first announced his marriage to his brother's widow, he passed quickly on to important affairs of state, but since then we have heard the incestuous nature of that marriage emphasized by both Hamlet and the Ghost. Are we to assume from her mentioning only the hastiness of their marriage—a censurable indiscretion perhaps but no mortal sin—that Gertrude failed to realize that her marriage to Claudius, no matter when performed, must bear the graver stain of incest? As she is at the time alone with the King, I think we must so assume. She hardly reveals here "a talent for seeing the essence of every situation presented before her eyes". But how can she have been so blind to the true nature of her marriage? The only explanation would seem to be that she is blinded by the traitorous gifts of Claudius, by the witchcraft of his wit. She thinks as he directs, acts as he wishes.

The next scene in which the Queen appears is III. ii—the play scene. Here she is on stage for 187 lines and speaks a total of two and one half lines. When to her first speech, "Come hither, my dear Hamlet, sit by me" [III. ii. 108], Hamlet replies that he prefers to sit by Ophelia, the Queen is silent until 127 lines later, when, to emphasize the purport of such lines as "None wed the second but who killed the first", Hamlet asks, "Madam, how like you this play?" She answers simply, "The lady doth protest too much, methinks" [III. ii. 180; 229-30]—a speech which need not suggest stupidity, for she, unlike us, has not heard the ghost and knows not what is in Hamlet's mind; but unless we are to think of her as an artful villainess indeed, the simplicity of her reply is enough to urge her complete innocence of any participation in the murder. She now follows the play intently, saying nothing more until, when the frightened King rises, she anxiously enquires "How fares my lord?" [III. ii. 267] In this scene then, aside from the first clear indication that Gertrude has been no accomplice in the murder, we see in her just what we see in her in other scenes—her love for her son, her devoted concern for Claudius, and her remarkable quietness, with long periods of silence.

It is when she next appears, in III. iv.—the so-called Closet Scene—that the Queen has her biggest part. The scene opens with Polonius' hiding himself behind the arras that he may overhear the interview between mother and son—an interview in which the Queen has promised to "be round with him" [III. iv. 5] in the hope of discovering the cause of Hamlet's strange behavior. The scheme had been conceived by Polonius and suggested to Claudius in II. ii, when Gertrude was not on stage. We do not witness the King's persuading the Queen to assist in this eavesdropping upon her son, but that she had received specific instructions on how the interview should be conducted is brought out in her conversation with Polonius before Hamlet enters:
Polonius: 'A will come straight. Look you lay home to him.  
Tell him his pranks have been too broad to bear with,  
And that your grace hath screened and stood between  
Much heat and him. I'll silence me even here.  
Pray you be round with him. . . .  
Queen: I'll warrant you; fear me not.
[III. iv. 1-6]

The Queen had consented to these "lawful espials", as she had consented earlier when Ophelia had been used as a decoy, probably both because she is hopeful that such a scheme may indeed unearth the secret of Hamlet's strange behavior and because the stronger Claudius is able always to dominate her will and persuade her to serve his purpose. That this second explanation is sound is, I believe, shown by a departure which Shakespeare here makes from the account of the Closet Scene as related by Belleforest. In Belleforest the King and his councillor, without taking the Queen into their confidence, arrange for the councillor to secrete himself where he may overhear mother and son; the Queen not only has no part in planning the interview, but does not suspect the presence of the eavesdropper until he is discovered by the crafty and suspicious Hamlet's beating his arms upon the hangings. By this change in the Queen's part from that of an unwitting participant to that of an active accomplice Shakespeare seems to emphasize the extent to which Claudius dominates her and uses her as his tool.

The Queen begins the closet interview with bluster and some confidence. She has apparently been well briefed as to what she shall say. But when Hamlet proves recalcitrant, when in an ugly mood he assumes the offensive and by so doing throws her out of the part she has been coached to play, she is for a brief moment bold and stubborn. "What have I done?" she cries:

What have I done, that thou dar'st wag thy tongue
In noise so rude against me?
[III. iv. 39-40]

But as Hamlet becomes more specific in his charges, Gertrude has neither the strength nor the inclination to bluster it further. She appears, indeed, stricken in conscience:

O Hamlet, speak no more,
Thou turn'st mine eyes into my very soul,
And there I see such black and grained spots
As will not leave their tinct.
[III. iv. 88-91]

And again,

O Hamlet, thou hast cleft my heart in twain.
[III. iv. 156]

Although in this scene the Queen has more speeches and more lines than she has in any other scene, she is throughout overshadowed by Hamlet. In the same number of speeches he speaks four times as many lines as does she. Of her twenty-four speeches, thirteen—more than half—are one line or less, and four others are less than two lines.

Some of her speeches invite comment. Miss Mackenzie has noted that Gertrude sees her penitence not as the consequence of her own actions but rather as a result of Hamlet's harsh words to her:
O Hamlet, thou hast cleft my heart in twain.
[III. iv. 156]

Second, it is important to note that the question which she, contrite, puzzled, and helpless, addresses to
Hamlet as he prepares to leave, "What shall I do?" [III. iv. 180], illustrates the lack of initiative and
independence which mark her throughout. Too weak to determine any procedure for herself, she must rely
upon others for guidance in every action.

More puzzling is the Queen's last speech in the scene—a reply to Hamlet's

I must to England, you know that?
Ger. Alack,
I had forgot. Tis so concluded on.
[III. iv. 200-01]

No one has ever questioned Gertrude's devotion to her son, although in urging him earlier to "stay with us, go
not to Wittenberg" [I. ii. 119], she may have spoken the instructions of Claudius as well as her motherly
affection. It is impossible that by "I had forgot" she could have meant other than that the many unhappy
events of the evening had crowded out of her mind the realization that Hamlet was to be sent to England. But
the King's decision that he be sent away she had apparently accepted without protest as one accustomed to
accepting without question what others decide for her.

In Belleforest's account the Queen, although she never appears after the Closet Scene, is definitely and
actively an ally of her son, working in his absence to facilitate his revenge. In Shakespeare, although she
protests to Hamlet:

Be thou assured, if words be made of breath,
And breath of life, I have no life to breathe
What thou hast said to me,
[III. iv. 197-99]

and although she keeps her promise, the Queen utters not one word in condemnation of the crimes of Claudius
which Hamlet has revealed to her, and indeed in the very next scene greets him as "mine own lord" [IV. i. 5].
Never is there an indication in the later scenes that her attitude toward Claudius or her relations with him have
been altered by what Hamlet has told her. True it is that immediately following the Closet Scene she
apparently lies to the King in an effort to protect her son. Although Hamlet has confessed to her that he is "not
in madness, But mad in craft", she assures the King that Hamlet is

Mad as the sea and wind when both contend
Which is the mightier. In his lawless fit,
Behind the arras hearing something stir,
Whips out his rapier, cries 'A rat, a rat!'
And in this brainish apprehension kills
The unseen good old man.
[IV. i. 7-12]

And she reports that Hamlet has gone

To draw apart the body he hath killed;
O'er whom his very madness, like some ore
Among a mineral of metals base,
One need have little hesitation in concluding that Gertrude is here lying in an effort to render Hamlet's act less responsible and therefore more pardonable. The Queen has not seen Hamlet since the audience witnessed their parting, and Hamlet was surely not weeping then. But though the Queen lies to help her son, it is important to add in any assay of her character that it was not upon her own initiative that she does so. Here no more than earlier is she acting independently. Incapable of herself determining any course of action, she is merely following the course which Hamlet had suggested to her. To her helpless "What shall I do?" Hamlet had replied:

Not this, by no means, that I bid you do:
Let the bloat King . . .
Make you to ravel all this matter out,
That I essentially am not in madness,
But mad in craft. 'Twere good you let him know,
For who that's but a queen, fair, sober, wise,
Would from a paddock, from a bat, a gib,
Such dear concernings hide? Who would do so?
No, in despite of sense and secrecy,
Unpeg the basket on the house's top,
Let the birds fly, and like the famous ape,
To try conclusions, in the basket creep
And break your own neck down.

Such is Hamlet's sarcastic direction in answer to the Queen's uncertain "What shall I do?" She must decide upon some course immediately, for the King is impatiently awaiting a report of the interview. Accordingly she follows Hamlet's direction; she lies to keep his secret, perhaps because maternal love demands that she protect him, but also because, accustomed to having others make all important decisions for her, she is incapable of substituting for Hamlet's direction any procedure of her own.

In Belleforest, as has been said, the Queen never appears after the account of the interview in her closet. Although we learn later that she had kept her promise to assist her son in his revenge upon her second husband by fashioning, during her son's absence in England, the means of his revenge, we are told nothing of her later life—how she conducted herself in her relations with the King or how she died. In Shakespeare's play, however, she figures in five later scenes—exactly half of the total number in which she appears. Her part in these scenes, having no basis in the older accounts, must have been added either by Shakespeare or by the author of an earlier lost play. The first of these scenes is that just mentioned—that in which she reports to the King. In only one of them, IV. v, her next appearance, does she reveal any remorse or any sense of guilt; and before the end of that scene her sense of guilt seems completely erased by a determination to follow the easier way, to accept the status quo, to continue a way of life she had found pleasant.

IV. v opens with her refusal to admit the mad Ophelia to her presence—a refusal due perhaps to a characteristic desire to escape any distressing situation, or perhaps to her already being burdened with grief and remorse. When Ophelia enters, Gertrude is sympathetic but quite inarticulate. Her three speeches to Ophelia are—in full:

1. How now, Ophelia?
2. Alas, sweet lady, what imports this song?
3. Nay, but Ophelia—
Then, upon the King's welcome entry, with "Alas, look here, my lord" [IV. v. 37], the Queen turns the unpleasant situation over to him and retires into silence until after Ophelia has departed. Her unwillingness to see Ophelia and her inability to express any words of comfort or sympathy may, as I have said, be due in part to her being, at the moment, too heavily oppressed by her own griefs and her own sense of guilt. As Ophelia enters, Gertrude offers in an aside the only admission of guilt she makes after the Closet Scene:

To my sick soul (as sin's true nature is)  
Each toy seems prologue to some great amiss.  
So full of artless jealousy is guilt,  
It spills itself in fearing to be split.  
[IV. v. 17-20]

Before the end of the scene, however, the Queen is to cry out upon Laertes' mob threatening the King:

How cheerfully on the false trail they cry!  
O, this is counter, you false Danish dogs!  
[IV. v. 110-11]

and, in order to save Claudius, is first to seize Laertes' arm and then to assure him that it was not Claudius who had caused the death of his father. Having, perhaps unconsciously, directed Laertes' hatred towards Hamlet, she offers no fuller explanation and is silent for the remaining ninety lines of the scene. Her extended silence here is certainly not indicative of remorse for her earlier acts; it has been characteristic of her throughout the play. In this scene she reveals perhaps, as she reveals nowhere else in the play, the sensual side of her love for Claudius. Before the scene is half over her sense of guilt has been crowded out of her mind. She shows no repentance. Unlike the Queen in Belleforest or the Queen in the pirated first quarto, she has not aligned herself on the side of her son. Now that he has gone, she finds it easier simply to continue the life she had led before he had made his dreadful revelation. Had Hamlet remained in Denmark, had he been at hand to remind her of her weakness and to answer whenever necessary her question "What shall I do?" it is possible that her sense of guilt might have persisted, that she might even have repented and changed her way of life. But without initiative and independence, she can in Hamlet's absence only drift with the current.

Only twice, then, does Gertrude reveal the least remorse—in the latter part of the Closet Scene and in the single aside as she awaits the entrance of the mad Ophelia. From that time on, as earlier in the play, her actions and speeches evince no prick of conscience although the Ghost, in his instructions to Hamlet in I. v, had implied that she was to suffer the consequence of her sins. "... Howsoever thou pursues this act", the Ghost had told his son,

Taint not thy mind, nor let thy soul contrive  
Against thy mother aught. Leave her to heaven  
And to those thorns that in her bosom lodge  
To prick and sting her. . . .  
[I. v. 85-8]

The Ghost is, as I have noted, most accurately informed of the past. That ghosts were often well informed of the future is indicated by Horatio's beseeching the Ghost to speak

If thou art privy to thy country's fate,  
Which happily foreknowing may avoid.  
[I. i. 133-34]
But that ghosts might be ignorant of the future and even uncomprehending of the present is shown in *The Spanish Tragedy* by the repeated questioning by the Ghost of Andrea as he watches the play unfold. The Ghost of King Hamlet clearly expects his son to sweep to a swift revenge; he does not understand the delay; nor surely did he expect such complete catastrophe to engulf the entire royal family. In spite of his exact knowledge of the past, therefore, it would appear that the Ghost’s knowledge of the immediate present and of the future was far too limited to warrant our acceptance as testimony of Gertrude’s remorse his mention of

. . . those thorns that in her bosom lodge
To prick and sting her. . . .
[I. v. 87-8]

Indeed, if one may, without confusing life and art, delve into the past of characters in a drama, it may be said that King Hamlet had ever but slenderly known his wife. Created in an heroic mould, he understood not the mortal frailties which might lead his “most seeming-virtuous queen”

to decline
Upon a wretch whose natural gifts were poor
To those of [his].
[I. v. 46, 50-2]

Just as he had, before learning of her transgressions, been deceived by his wife's seeming-virtue, so, after learning of them, he expected her to be tortured by the stings of conscience. He was apparently twice deceived.

But to continue tracing the Queen's part in the play. She appears, of course, in all of the last three scenes. She enters late in IV. vii, after the King and Laertes have completed their plans for bringing about Hamlet's death, and in her longest speech in the play announces Ophelia's drowning. Her purpose here, however, is that of a messenger; her speech throws little light on her character—and certainly reveals no awareness of her own responsibility for the young girl's death.

In V. i, the scene in the graveyard, the Queen first mentions in a single speech her thwarted hope that Ophelia might have been Hamlet's bride, and then, as Hamlet and Laertes struggle in the grave, she, in her remaining speeches, follows the lead of Claudius:

*King:* Pluck them asunder.
*Queen:* Hamlet, Hamlet!
*King:* O, he is mad, Laertes.
*Queen:* For love of God, forbear him.
[V. i. 264, 272-73]

Then:

This is mere madness;
And thus a while the fit will work on him.
Anon as patient as the female dove . . .
His silence will sit drooping.
[V. i. 284-88]

The Queen, of course, does not know of the treachery plotted by Claudius and Laertes. She must by these speeches have sought to end the struggle in the grave and to lessen Laertes’ resentment at Hamlet's behavior, but it is noticeable—and I think characteristic—that in each of her speeches she echoes or enlarges upon ideas
just expressed by Claudius.

In V. ii, the concluding scene of the play, the Queen for the first time, I believe, acts with initiative and speaks for herself. Just before the court enters to watch the fencing match, an unnamed lord brings a message to Hamlet: "The Queen desires you to use some gentle entertainment to Laertes before you fall to play" [V. ii. 206-07]. As the effect of this message would be to lessen any suspicions of foul play, to encourage Hamlet's acceptance of the match as a "brother's wager frankly play[ed]" [V. ii. 253], one is tempted to suggest that the Queen's message may have originated with the King, that here as earlier the Queen is being used to further the plan of another. (It will be remembered that immediately after the play-within-the-play Polonius brought Hamlet word that "the Queen would speak with you, and presently" [III. ii. 375], but, as previously noted, the idea of the interview was not the Queen's. It had originated with Polonius, and the King, to whom he suggested it [III. i. 182ff.], had off-stage persuaded the Queen to cooperate.) However, in the absence of any statement to the contrary, I presume we must accept the message as the lord delivers it, as the Queen's own suggestion. And in some respects it is a thoroughly characteristic suggestion, revealing as it does her recurring hope that in spite of all that had gone before, she and others, without being required to pay the price of penitence, may go on enjoying the present by simply refusing to remember the past.

During the closing scene the Queen is silent for the first sixty-one lines she is on stage. She then within a space of twenty-four lines has four speeches, totaling six pentameter lines. She refers to Hamlet's scantness of breath and offers her napkin to mop his brow. Then, for the first time in the play escaping the dominance of Claudius, she acts independently and counter to his expressed wish—and her crossing him means her death.

Queen: . . . The queen carouses to thy fortune, Hamlet.
King: Gertrude, do not drink.
Queen: I will, my lord; I pray you pardon me.
[V. ii. 289-91]

And so she drinks from the poisoned cup. I can see no justification whatsoever for the view of a critic who sought to defend the Queen's character by suggesting that she, suspecting the wine to be poisoned, drank it to protect Hamlet and to atone for the wrongs and sins of her past. Others, like the author of the New Exegesis of Shakespeare (1859), have remarked that her death was "as exquisitely negative as possible—that is, by poison, from her own hand, in a VINOUS BEVERIDGE [sic], and THROUGH MISTAKE." But however negative her death, it was, ironically, the result of her one act of independence. And her final speech, in answer to the King's hasty explanation, "She swounds to see them bleed":

No, no, the drink, the drink! O my dear Hamlet!
The drink, the drink! I am poisoned—
[V. ii. 309-10]

Here for the first time the Queen seems to understand the essence of the situation. Only in this last speech does she recognize or admit to herself the villainy of her second husband. Only here—long after her counterpart in Belleforest had done so—does she take her position beside her son and against the King. (pp. 235-46)


**Criticism: Ophelia**

Theodore Lidz
Lidz argues that Shakespeare dramatized Ophelia's madness to provide a countertheme to action surrounding Hamlet's own insanity. But whereas the playwright remains ambiguous about the reality of the prince's madness, the critic continues, he portrays Ophelia as classically insane. According to Lidz, Ophelia's descent into madness does not merely result from her father's murder, but rather his murder by Hamlet, whom she loves. As a result Ophelia is placed in "the intolerable predicament of having to turn away from the person she loves and idealizes because that person is responsible for her father's murder."

Shakespeare carefully places Ophelia's madness in apposition to Hamlet's, illuminating the causes of each by making Ophelia's plight the female counterpart of Hamlet's dilemma. The action around Ophelia's insanity forms the countertheme to the action surrounding Hamlet's madness, balancing the plot and leading to Hamlet's death as well as to Ophelia's. Each dies more or less because there is nothing left for them but to desire death as an escape from an existence that has become intolerable.

Whereas Shakespeare is ambiguous about the reality of Hamlet's insanity and depicts him as on the border, fluctuating between sanity and madness, he portrays Ophelia as definitely, one might even say classically, insane. Even before she comes on stage, a gentleman gives us an excellent description of her condition. Would that psychiatric texts could describe as clearly!

She speaks much of her father; says she hears
There's tricks i' the world; and hems and beats her heart;
Spurns envyously at straws; speaks things in doubt,
That carry but half sense; her speech is nothing,
Yet the unshaped use of it doth move
The hearers to collection; they aim at it,
And botch the words up fit to their own thoughts;
Which, as her winks and nods and gestures yield them,
Indeed would make one think there might be thought,
Though nothing sure, yet much unhappily.
[IV. v. 4-13]

She does not storm, or "take arms against a sea of troubles" [III. i. 58]; but rather, as a passive, obedient and very feminine person she is simply

poor Ophelia,
Divided from herself and her fair judgement,
Without the which we are pictures, or mere beasts.
[IV. v. 84-6]

She sings one ditty about her love who is dead and gone, as if referring to her father, then another about a girl abandoned because she let her valentine tumble her before being wed—a bawdy bit that has led some critics to consider that the sweet Ophelia might have been distraught because she had given in to Hamlet's "unmaster'd importunity" [I. iii. 32] and was now pregnant, with marriage to Hamlet no longer possible. However, to most, including those in the play, who knew her best, the cause of Ophelia's madness seems apparent. Claudius says:

Oh, this' the poison of deep grief; it springs
All from her father's death.
[IV. v. 75-6]

And Laertes muses about his mad sister:
O heavens! is't possible a young maid's wits
Should be as mortal as an old man's life?
Nature is fine in love, and where 'tis fine
It sends some precious instance of itself
After the thing it loves.
[IV. v. 160-64]

The comment is accentuated by Ophelia's chant:

_They bore him barefaced on the bier;
Hey non nonny, nonny, hey nonny;
And on his grave rain'd many a tear._
[IV. v. 165-67]

The gentle Ophelia, it seems, cannot absorb her father's murder. However, it is not her father's murder that has driven her mad but, rather, his murder by Hamlet, the person she loves and upon whose love she has placed her hopes. Now, she can never marry him, and worse still, she has an obligation to hate him; indeed she must feel hatred toward him for depriving her of her beloved father, her original love. Shakespeare, then, has not only placed Ophelia's insanity in apposition to Hamlet's but has emphasized the same crucial human frailty as the cause of the emotional disturbance in both the hero and heroine.

As we have seen, Hamlet mourns for his father, but his melancholy is induced by his bitterness against his mother because of her hasty marriage to his uncle; and his anguish and rage against his mother become intolerable when he learns that she has been untrue to his father. Hamlet is tormented by his desire to take vengeance against his mother, the person who had once been closest and most dear to him. He manages to control his matricidal impulsions, but his mother is lost to him as a love object. He struggles to regain her by imploring her to renounce her sexual life with Claudius and return to him and become faithful to his father's memory. At the very moment when Hamlet believes he may have succeeded, he inadvertently kills Polonius bringing new woes on himself and sealing Ophelia's fate.

Ophelia, like Hamlet, mourns for her father, but his death is not a sufficient reason for her to lose her sanity. She, too, is in the intolerable predicament of having to turn away from the person she loves and idealizes because that person is responsible for her father's murder. Her father is dead, and Hamlet, as his slayer, is barred to her affections. She can no longer transfer her attachment from her father to Hamlet. Her entire orientation to the future has suddenly been destroyed.

Both Hamlet and Ophelia, then, are faced by the sudden and irretrievable loss of a love object because of that person's unforgivable behavior in killing, actually or symbolically, a beloved parent whose death requires vengeance. Shakespeare clearly saw how such situations could engender a violently confused emotional state and lead a person to feel that the world was empty and worthless and those who inhabit it perfidious and deceitful. Life becomes intolerable; the sufferer escapes the dilemma by abandoning rationality and when that fails, by abandoning life itself.

Now, the reader might not think that Polonius, a man already in his dotage, a spying busybody whom Hamlet considered a tedious old fool, could be so important to Ophelia. Indeed, one might similarly wonder why Hamlet should be so concerned about the deceitful and wanton Gertrude. Oedipal attachments do not, as we know from countless patients, involve a rational evaluation of the parent. If raised with reasonable parental care, the boy has a deep attachment to his mother, and the girl to her father. Ophelia's attachment to Polonius is accentuated by her motherless state. As a widower, Polonius may have been overly protective of his daughter and especially affectionate to her; and Ophelia, as commonly happens in such situations, may have felt free to fantasy that she could become a replacement for her mother in her father's life, and thus form a
particularly intense attachment to him. Similarly, Hamlet is fatherless, but his situation differed from Ophelia's as he had lost his father much more recently. Nevertheless, as we have noted, his father's death could lead to a recrudescence of Hamlet's old attachment to his mother as well as a heightening of his identification with his father. He could then feel that his mother's infidelity to his father was also an infidelity to him.

Ophelia, we should note, is already under considerable emotional stress at the time her father is killed. The vacillations in Hamlet's attitude and behavior toward her could not but be extremely unsettling to the very young woman who idolized and idealized him. She is, one day, his most beloved, who must never doubt his love [II. ii. 116-24]; shortly thereafter, she is the object of his venom and the recipient of his malignant curse; and then, on the same day, she finds him bantering salaciously with her. She cannot know that Hamlet's attitude toward her reflects his disillusionment in his mother. To her, Hamlet's inconstancy can only mean deceitfulness or madness. Ophelia finds him mad, and, hopefully, mad because she has been forced to reject him. Hamlet slays Polonius by mistake: he had not, like Claudius, committed a premeditated murder for his own advancement. We must even consider that were Hamlet not so out of control, he might still beg Ophelia's forgiveness for his error. However, that is not the way the play was written, or could have been written. (pp. 88-92)


J. Dover Wilson

[Wilson provides a detailed interpretation of the "nunnery scene" between Hamlet and Ophelia in Act III, scene i. The critic discusses Ophelia's role as a decoy, describing how she makes the prince suspicious of a plot by overplaying her part when returning his love letters. Hamlet is disgusted by her role as a decoy, Dover Wilson maintains, for it mirrors his own mother's betrayal when she married Claudius. According to the critic, Hamlet tests Ophelia by asking where her father is, but when she lies, she provokes the frenzy with which the prince concludes the scene. Wilson also emphasizes Hamlet's repetition of the word "nunnery," maintaining that for Elizabethans the word not only meant a convent, but also carried the bawdy connotation of a brothel. For a defense of Ophelia's character and motives in the "nunnery scene," see the essay by Harold Jenkins cited in the Sources for Further Study.]

[In Act III, scene i, the] King bids the Queen leave him with Polonius and Ophelia; and tells her of their purpose. He insists, and she accepts the point without question, that they are "lawful espials". The innocent little scheme is justified in the interests of Denmark, and of Hamlet himself; and she expresses the hope that the outcome will bring happiness for them all, Ophelia included. Gertrude is always hoping for the best. The King's words.

For we have closely sent for Hamlet hither.
That he, as 'twere by accident, may here
Affront Ophelia.
[III. i. 29-31]

should be carefully noted in passing, if we wish to understand exactly what follows. Hamlet is not coining to the lobby of his own motion; he has been sent for. Not, of course, ostensibly by Claudius, but "closely", that is privately or without his knowledge of the real sender of the message. Nevertheless some kind of pretext has been given; and, when he arrives, he will find, not what he expects, but Ophelia. There would be no flaw in this expedient, if the object of it had not happened to overhear the whole plot the day before.
The snare is now laid; the decoy made to appear at once innocent and tempting; and the fowlers take cover. Polonius gives Ophelia a prayer-book, and says "walk you here" [III. i. 42]; "here" being, of course, the lobby at the back of the stage. There is, however, a theatrical tradition that she should be kneeling when Hamlet enters, which is I think a sound one; for, if she is only walking up and down with a book in her hands, how does he know that she is at her "orisons"? I presume, therefore, that some kind of prie-dieu stood in the lobby. Finally, before actually "bestowing" himself behind the arras, Claudius utters an aside, which it is also important not to miss. "Read on this book", says the moralising father to his daughter,

That show of such an exercise may colour
Your loneliness; we are oft to blame in this,
'Tis too much proved, that with devotion's visage
And pious action we do sugar o'er
The devil himself;
[III. i. 43-8]

upon which the King comments to himself:

O, 'tis too true,
How smart a lash that speech doth give my conscience.
The harlot's cheek, beautied with plast'ring art,
Is not more ugly to the thing that helps it,
Than is my deed to my most painted word:
O heavy burden!
[III. i. 48-53]

It is the first indication in the play that Claudius possesses a conscience; and it leads up to the "blenching" in the play scene and to the prayer that follows. But there is more in it than this. The reference, after "devotion's visage", to

The harlot's cheek, beautied with plast'ring art

is leitmotiv on Shakespeare's part. The linked images hark back to the "fishmonger" and his "good kissing carrion" [II. ii. 174, 182]; and reopen a theme which Hamlet will presently elaborate.

Hamlet walks into the trap in complete unconsciousness. As he enters, his mind is not on the plot, his uncle or Ophelia. If he remembers the Ghost at all, it is to write it off as a snare of the evil one. He is back again where he was when we first had sight of his inner self; back in the mood of the soliloquy which begins

O that this too too sullied flesh would melt,
Thaw and resolve itself into a dew,
Or that the Everlasting had not fixed
His canon 'gainst self-slaughter.
[I. ii. 129-32]

But he is no longer thinking of his own "sullied flesh", still less of the divine command. By constantly turning it over he has worn the problem to the bone:

To be, or not to be, that is the question.
[III. i. 55]
A like expression of utter weariness is not to be found in the rest of human literature. Sleep, death, annihilation, his whole mind is concentrated upon these; and the only thing that holds his arm from striking home with "the bare bodkin" [III. i. 75] is the thought of "what dreams may come", "the dread of something after death" [III. i. 65,77]. . . . He believes in immortality, which means that by death he may exchange one nightmare for a worse. Eternity has him in a trap, which dwarfs the little traps of Claudius and Polonius to nothingness. No one but Shakespeare could have interrupted an exciting dramatic intrigue with a passage like this. The surprise and the audacity of it take our breath away, and render the pity of it the more overwhelming.

As the meditation finishes, Hamlet sees Ophelia behind him upon her knees. The sight reminds him of nothing except "the pangs of disprized love", and those have long been drowned in "a sea of troubles" [III. i. 71, 53]. "The fair Ophelia!" [III. i. 88] he exclaims; the words have no warmth in them. And, when he addresses her, he speaks in irony:

Nymph, in thy orisons
Be all my sins remembered.
[III. i. 88-9]

Romantic actors interpret this as gushing tenderness; and even [Samuel] Johnson calls it "an address grave and solemn, such as the foregoing meditation excited in his thoughts". [Edward] Dowden, however, sees "estrangement in the word 'nymph'"; and I find deliberate affectation in that word and in "orisons". They are both pretentious expressions, while the reference to "all my sins", the sins for which she has jilted him, the sins he will enlarge upon later in the scene, surely indicates a sardonic tone. In any event, it is certain that most critics have completely misunderstood the dialogue that follows, because in their sympathy with Ophelia they have forgotten that it is not Hamlet who has "repelled" her, but she him. She had refused to see him and had returned his letters; she could not even speak a word of comfort when in deep trouble he forced his way into her room with mute pitiable appeal.

After that he had done with her; and the Ophelia he now meets is a stranger. Stranger indeed! For listen:

Good my lord,
How does your honour for this many a day?
[III. i. 89-90]

Is she implying that he has neglected her? It was only yesterday he had been with her despite her denial of his access. But at first he takes small note of her words and answers with polite aloofness:

I humbly thank you, well, well, well.
[III. i. 91]

It is a form of address he employs later with people like the Norwegian Captain and Osric, while the repeated "well" sounds bored. Nevertheless, she continues:

My lord, I have remembrances of yours,
That I have longed long to re-deliver.
I pray you now receive them.
[III. i. 92-4]

What should that mean? Once again, however, he brushes it aside: "I never gave you aught" [III. i. 95],—the woman to whom I once gave gifts is dead. Yet still she persists:
My honoured lord, you know right well you did,
And with them words of so sweet breath composed
As made the things more rich. Their perfume lost,
Take these again, for to the noble mind
Rich gifts wax poor when givers prove unkind.
There, my lord.
[III. i. 96-101]

And here she draws the trinkets from her bosom and places them on the table before him.

The unhappy girl has sadly overplayed her part. Her little speech, ending with a sententious couplet, as Dowden notes, "has an air of being prepared". Worse than that, she, the jilt, is accusing him of coldness towards her. Worst of all, Hamlet who has been "sent for", who meets her in the lobby "by accident", finds her prepared not only with a speech but with the gifts also. She means no harm; she has romantically arranged a little play scene, in the hope no doubt of provoking a passionate declaration of affection, which perhaps

Will bring him to his wonted way again,
[III. i. 40]

as the Queen had remarked just before Hamlet's entrance, and will at any rate prove to the King that she and her father are right in their diagnosis of the distemper. But the effect upon Hamlet is disastrous. Until that moment he had forgotten the plot; it is a far cry from thoughts of "the undiscovered country" [III. i. 78] to this discovery. But he is now thoroughly awake, and sees it all. Here is the lobby and the decoy, playing a part, only too unblushingly; and there at the back is the arras, behind which lurk the Fishmonger and Uncle Claudius. His wild "Ha, ha!" the fierce question "are you honest?" [III. i. 102] that is to say "are you not a whore?" together with a significant glance round the room, are enough to show the audience that he realises at last, and warn them to expect "antic disposition". Everything he says for the rest of the scene is intended for the ears of the eavesdroppers. As for the daughter who has been "loosed" to him, she will only get what she deserves. For play-acting has completed her downfall in his eyes. First the abrupt breaking-off of all intercourse between them, without any reason given, then the failure to meet his last appeal, then the overhearing of the plot in which she was to take a leading part, and last this willing and all too facile participation: is it surprising that to an imagination "as foul as Vulcan's stithy" [III. ii. 83-4] such things should appear in the worst possible light, or that he should treat her from henceforth as the creature he believes her to be? He puts her to one final test before the scene is over; but the dice are loaded against her. Thus, through a chain of misconceptions, due to nothing worse than narrowness of vision and over-readiness to comply with her father's commands, Ophelia blackens her own character in her lover's eyes. The process has been obscured hitherto owing to the absence of one important link in the chain; but the link now in place makes all clear, explains Hamlet's attitude, and shows her fate as even more pathetic than we had supposed.

Everything he says, I repeat, for the rest of the scene is intended for the ears of Claudius and Polonius, whom he knows to be behind the arras. The restored entry at [II. ii. 167] happily rids us of the traditional stage-business of Polonius exposing himself to the eye of Hamlet and the audience, which has hitherto been the only way open to stage-managers of putting any meaning at all into the scene. It is a trick at once crude and inadequate: crude, because the chief councillor of Denmark is neither stupid nor clumsy, and to represent him so, as producers are apt to do, is to degrade intrigue to buffoonery; inadequate, because it only tells Hamlet of one, whereas his words clearly lose a great deal of force if he is not known to be conscious of the presence of two. He speaks at both; but he speaks, of course, to Ophelia, while as he speaks he has yet a fourth person constantly in mind, his mother. If this be remembered, and if we also keep in view Hamlet's habitual lack of self-control once he becomes excited, the dialogue is easy to follow.

I return to it:
Hamlet. Ha, ha! are you honest?
Ophelia. My lord?
Hamlet. Are you fair?
Ophelia. What means your lordship?
Hamlet. That if you be honest and fair, your honesty should admit no discourse to your beauty.
[III. i. 102-07]

If, that is, you were the chaste maiden you pretend to be, you would not allow your beauty to be used as a bait in this fashion. Ophelia, of course, misunderstands and, supposing him to mean that her beauty and his honesty ought not to discourse together, wonderingly enquires: "Could beauty, my lord, have better commerce than with honesty?" [III. i. 108-09] To which he, twisting her words back to his own meaning, replies:

Ay truly, for the power of beauty will sooner transform honesty from what it is to a bawd, than the force of honesty can translate beauty into his likeness. This was sometime a paradox, but now the time gives it proof.
[III. i. 110-14]

To paraphrase again: "physical Beauty is stronger than virtue, and will make use of Virtue herself as her procuress. People used to think this incredible, but your conduct proves its truth." He refers to "devotion's visage" and the "pious action" with which Ophelia had tried to "sugar o'er" her designs upon him. But he is probably also thinking of his mother's conduct, as is suggested by the talk of "our old stock" that follows [III. i. 117]. Indeed, from this point onwards Ophelia becomes identified in his mind with the Frailty whose name is Woman, and that in turn leads to thoughts of his own "sullied flesh". He goes on: "I did love you once" [III. i. 114], that is, before my mother took off the rose from the fair forehead of an innocent love. [III. iv. 43]

But a son of Gertrude is "rank and gross in nature" [I. ii. 136] and capable of nothing except lust; so that I did not really love you. "Conception is a blessing" [II. ii. 184], but what children could a man like me and a woman like you hope for save a brood of sinners? Better a nunnery!

So far Hamlet's talk has been in fishmonger-vein, and is meant for the Jephthah [cf. II. ii. 403ff.] behind the arras. But now is the turn for Uncle Claudius. The mention of corrupt stock leads by natural transition to an elaborate confession of criminal propensities on Hamlet's part which we know to be ridiculous, but which is intended to make the King's blood run cold. "I am very proud, revengeful, ambitious" [III. i. 123-24] is the gist of it. Could any other three epithets be found less appropriate to Hamlet? But Claudius says he is ambitious; and Claudius is a reasonable man. The following, too, sounds terrible:

with more offences at my beck, than I have thoughts to put them in, imagination to give them shape, or time to act them in:
[III. i. 124-25]

—until we scan it and find that it amounts to nothing at all, since the same might be said of any mortal.

At this point Hamlet gives Ophelia her last chance with his sudden "Where's your father?" [III. i. 129]. She answers with a lie, as it would seem to him, though of course she is observing the most ordinary precautions and, as she thinks, humouring a madman. But it is this crowning proof of her treachery, I suggest, that provokes the frenzy with which the episode closes. He goes out, perhaps in the hope that the rats may emerge from their hole and that he may catch them in the act of so doing. Twice he rushes from the room and with each return his manner grows more excited. His two final speeches are mainly food for fishmongers, and he
concludes by coming very near to calling Ophelia a prostitute to her face. The repeated injunction "to a
nunnery go" [III. i. 120, 129, 136, 139, 149] is significant in this connection, since "nunnery" was in common
Elizabethan use a cant term for a house of ill-fame. And that this was the traditional interpretation of Hamlet's
meaning on the seventeenth-century stage is shown by the Der bestrafte Brudermord which makes him say
"go to a nunnery, but not to a nunnery where two pairs of slippers lie at the bed side".

As he leaves for the last time he throws his uncle one more morsel to chew: "I say we will have no mo
marriage—those that are married already, all but one, shall live, the rest shall keep as they are" [III. i. 147-49].
Why, it may be asked, does Hamlet deliberately and recklessly threaten the King in this way? Partly, as I have
already suggested, because Hamlet always acts as if he were just on the point of killing his uncle, and partly
for reasons which will become clear later, in any event, these threats show that the Prince has thoroughly
grasped the hints about ambition dropped by Rosencrantz and Guildenstern; and is now posing as the
discontented heir thirsting for revenge, a role he will play to remarkable purpose in the next scene.

After Hamlet's final departure, Ophelia is given twelve lines of lamentation over his fallen state, before the
estpials steal warily from their hiding place, a circumspection natural after his repeated exits, but surely
enough to warn us that Polonius, with whom caution is almost a disease, could never have revealed his
presence to Hamlet, as the traditional stage practice makes him do. The discussion of what they have heard
shows that their points of view have in no way converged. Claudius scornfully dismisses the forlorn love
theory; nor does he think that melancholy has yet developed into utter madness. But Hamlet has said enough
to prove himself to be in a very dangerous frame of mind; too dangerous to remain any longer near the royal
person:

He shall with speed to England,
For the demand of our neglected tribute.
Haply the seas, and countries different,
With variable objects, shall expel
This something-settled matter in his heart,
Whereon his brains still beating puts him thus
From fashion of himself.
[III. i. 169-75]

At present Claudius thinks of England as a health-resort; it is only after the play scene that he sees it as a
grave. Polonius agrees with the scheme but cannot subscribe to his royal master's diagnosis of the disease.
"But yet I do believe", he mutters while assenting to the projected voyage,

The origin and commencement of his grief
Sprung from neglected love;
[III. i. 176-78]

and he urges that the theory shall be put to one more test before the voyage takes place. (pp. 125-36)

Source: J. Dover Wilson, in his What Happens in Hamlet, third edition, Cambridge at the University Press,
1962, 357p.

**Essays: Hamlet's Delay**

The question of why Hamlet does not immediately avenge his father's death is probably the best-known
critical problem in Shakespeare studies. The most obvious reply to this inquiry is that if the Danish prince
moved at once upon the Ghost's report of foul "murther" and killed Claudius straightaway, then there would
be no further story for Shakespeare to tell after the start of the play's second act. From this simplistic (if valid) standpoint, Hamlet's delay is essential to the tragedy's narrative progression. More important, while there is plenty of action in Hamlet (a stage work in which all of the major characters suffer untimely deaths), the play's plot is plainly subordinate to the tandem development of Hamlet's character and certain philosophical themes such as the knotty issues of mortality and chance. Absent his deferral of action, there would be no need for Hamlet to grow into his role as "scourge and minister," and no dramatic occasions at hand for his (and our) consideration of the deeper issues that Shakespeare poses in this tragedy.

A second response to this question challenges its underlying premises. It proceeds from the counter-assertion that Hamlet does, in fact, act forcefully long before the play's final act. By Act V, Hamlet has invented the "mousetrap" of the play-within-a-play, slain Polonius and dragged his corpse away, persuaded the off-stage pirates to release him from captivity, and cleverly arranged the demise of his erstwhile schoolmates, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Moreover, after being told about the appearance of Ur-Hamlet's apparition on the walks of Elsinore Castle, Hamlet says to Horatio that he will speak with his father's ghost "though hell itself should gape/And bid me to hold my peace" (I, ii. ll.244-245). Indeed, Hamlet casts aside the fears of Horatio and Marcellus about what awaits him when the Ghost beckons, and orders them to unhand him so that he can speak face-to-face with this awesome, fear-provoking figure. These prior acts are not those of a passive or timid soul.

Nevertheless, neither of these pat answers is sufficient to overcome our sense that Hamlet wavers in carrying out the commission laid upon him by the Ghost. Not only does his excuse for not killing the king while he is at prayer ring hollow, Claudius's death in Act V is not the outcome of a truly deliberate act, but a seemingly chance occurrence brought about by circumstances that Hamlet's enemies have contrived. Our sense that Hamlet delays action is reinforced by his demeanor and, above all, by his own words. When we first see the Prince on stage, dressed in black and self-exiled to the periphery of the court, he assumes the role of a critical observer making disparaging asides about Claudius and his consort. After learning of his uncle's crime, Hamlet comes into court in Act II, scene ii reading a book. The association of Hamlet with "mere words" is strengthened by his penchant for ingenious but pointless verbal banter and highlighted by the inordinate number of soliloquies assigned to him by the playwright. Most explicitly, our impression that Hamlet avoids action comes from the Prince's own lips. Shakespeare's Danish prince berates himself as a "coward" in three of the play's central soliloquies. In Act II, scene ii, he declares, "O, what a rogue and a peasant slave am I!" (II, ii. 1.550), and then asks the quasi-rhetorical question, "Am I a coward?" (I.571). Thereafter, he rebukes himself for not acting in the famous "To be or not to be" speech of Act III, scene i. Later, having been exiled to England for his own "safety," Hamlet encounters a captain in the army of his Norwegian counterpart, Fortinbras, and contrasts the bravery of these men at arms with his own indecisiveness, exclaiming, "How all my occasions do inform against me./And spur my dull revenge!" (IV, iv. ll.32-33).

There are at least three psychological bases that critics of the play have identified as sources of Hamlet's procrastination. First, even before he learns of his uncle's iniquity, Hamlet is in a depressed state of mind, saying directly in the play's second scene, "How (weary), stale, flat, and unprofitable/Seems to me all the uses of this world!" (I, ii. ll.133-134). At the start of the play, then, Hamlet is clearly in the midst of a crisis that has undercut his desire and his capacity to take meaningful action. Second, in partial contrast to the depressed mood explanation, many critics have asserted that there is a permanent flaw in Hamlet's character that constrains him from acting, that his penchant for playing the part of a "thinker" interferes with his ability to act the role of a "doer" or that there are internal conflicts, notably sub-conscious sexual drives, that inhibit him or divert him from his purpose. Lastly, there is the frequently voiced explanation that Hamlet can only act after he gains a sense of his own identity, proclaiming himself to be "Hamlet the Dane" in the penultimate graveyard scene (V, i. 1.251).

Alternatively, there are forces external to Hamlet's psychological make-up that have been advanced as causes for his delay. To begin, there is Hamlet's lingering uncertainty about the Ghost and the story he tells in the last
scene of Act I. From his surprised reaction to Ur-Hamlet's tale of his death at the hands of Claudius it is
evident that the Prince did not previously suspect the true depth of his step-father/uncle's evil. It is only after
watching the king's guilt surface during the "Murder of Gonzago" performance that Hamlet has any
independent confirmation that what the Ghost has told him is true. Given the thin evidence available to him,
Hamlet's hesitation to kill a blood relative because an apparition has told him to do so is understandable.

But something is rotten in Denmark from the outset and there is a pervasive feeling of disease in the kingdom
even among the common people of the realm. Although rarely addressed by critics of the play, political forces
outside the court do play a prominent role in Hamlet. For example, Claudius tells his Lords that Hamlet must
be exiled because his popularity with the people poses a danger to his reign, and he then tells Laertes that they
cannot punish Hamlet for the killing of Polonius because of the threat of insurrection by the Prince's
supporters. This political dimension of the play actually bursts onto the stage, as Laertes and a mob calling for
him to become Denmark's king literally kick down the doors of Elsinore in Act IV, scene vi. Moreover, on
four separate occasions (Act I, scene ii; Act II, scene ii; Act IV, scene iv; and Act V, scene ii), the figure of
Prince Fortinbras surfaces, first by report and eventually in person. These intrusions from the external world
remind us that the consequences of Hamlet's actions are not restricted to the court. The killing of Claudius is a
political act that constitutes the most heinous crime of Shakespeare's time, regicide, with problematic results
for its perpetrator and for the kingdom at large. While political considerations are absent from Hamlet's
speeches during the first four acts of the play, they come to the fore at its very end as the dying Prince directs
Horatio to tell his story and appoints Fortinbras as successor to Denmark's throne. Quite simply, Hamlet may
be reluctant to act because doing so is offensive not only to heaven but to the state and the peace of the
commonwealth.

**Essays: Exploring Hamlet's Hesitation**

Perhaps one of the most perplexing problems a modern audience may have with Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is the
obvious question: what takes him so long to act on the Ghost's request for revenge? The obvious but simple
answer is that if he did not take his time, we would have 'Hamlet: The Short Story' instead of 'Hamlet: The
Classic Play'. There are, however, valid reasons for Hamlet's slow behaviour. Among them are his public role
in the monarchy of Denmark, his education, and the environment of Elsinore.

Hamlet is first and foremost the Prince of Denmark. There are no brothers or sisters, and he is the popular,
well-liked son of an equally popular and well-liked King and Queen. Not unlike the royal families of today,
the royals of Elsinore have two lives—a public one and a private one, both of which are very much
interlinked. Their lives as a whole are really not their own, yet their privacy is apparently a sacrifice they are
willing to make to render service to Denmark. Hamlet's father, King Hamlet, had done much to ensure that
Denmark was well protected. His untimely death was marked by intense mourning at the court, as well it
should have been for a man of his position.

However, Gertrude's marriage to Claudius before a month of mourning had passed could be interpreted as a
breach of protocol. This is why in the opening scenes, Claudius goes to such lengths to calm and soothe the
concerns of the court. When Hamlet returns to the court from school in Wittenburg, Germany, it is impossible
that he can escape what awaits him.

The tenants of this castle include the King's minister, Polonius, and his family, Laertes and Ophelia, as well as
a coterie of government officials (Cornelius and Voltemand), guards (Marcellus and Bernardo and their
companies), and courtiers (Osric, for example). In this environment, to have even a small amount of privacy is
almost impossible since there is always someone somewhere. Such a transgression as the apparently
unprovoked murder of a royal minister would open all sorts of questions for Claudius that he may be able to
answer.
Even Hamlet's private life is of public concern, especially when it comes to his selection of a wife. Laertes tells Ophelia in no uncertain terms that her relationship with Hamlet is fruitless:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Perhaps he loves you now,} \\
\text{And no soil nor cautel doth besmirch} \\
\text{The virtue of his will; but you must fear,} \\
\text{His greatness being weighed, his will is not his own.} \\
\text{For he himself is subject to his birth.} \\
\text{He may not, as unvalued persons do,} \\
\text{Carve for himself, for on his choice depends} \\
\text{The safety and health of this whole state,} \\
\text{And therefore must his choice be circumscribed} \\
\text{Unto the voice and yielding of that body} \\
\text{Whereof he is the head.}
\end{align*}
\]

(1.3.14-24)

The selection of a future queen is an issue at the very core of a monarchy's survival. On the political side, it was common practice to cement peace treaties with a marriage between two ruling houses. A wife's main function as queen was to produce a male heir for the King. In a kingdom like Denmark, which had an elected monarchy, it was doubly important that a future king be suitably matched for the peace and stability of the country.

Gertrude has produced Hamlet; however, the possibility of a direct heir for Claudius is remote, if not impossible, as Hamlet says: 'at your age/ The heyday in the blood is tame' (3.4.1617). The pressure on Hamlet to continue the line and Claudius' desire to keep the Prince off the throne come into direct conflict. Ophelia, as the daughter of a minister, cannot bring either wealth or security to a marriage with Hamlet. Although Hamlet's profession of love at her funeral is moving and sincere, it is unlikely that they would have been allowed to marry had she lived. Gertrude's comment that she thought Ophelia would have been Hamlet's wife is easy to say now that the girl is dead, but implies that Gertrude recognises a worth in Ophelia that sets her apart from the other women in Elsinore. However, we only see two women, Gertrude and Ophelia. The reality of the situation is that Ophelia was unable to handle the trauma of losing her father. A future queen would have to come to terms privately with grief, and show a cool, sophisticated demeanour in public. Ophelia, then, was ill-equipped for the duality of monarchy, regardless of what Gertrude says. Furthermore, in consideration of Hamlet's public responsibilities, she would have been found lacking in queenly qualities.

Aside from these aspects of his current role, Hamlet's education at Wittenberg has its implications in his move back to Elsinore. In school, Hamlet would, presumably, have to act like a future king. As with any prince, Hamlet is aware that he can only be king on the death of the King, one of the frustrating and potentially depressing aspects of being a king-in-waiting. Queen Victoria's son, Albert, waited almost sixty years to succeed his mother, and today, Prince Charles has almost waited just as long. For Hamlet, however, there is a slight twist. Denmark had an elected monarchy so that not only did his father have to die first, but Hamlet also needed to win the election. Claudius, King Hamlet's brother, was in Denmark when Hamlet was not. Therefore Hamlet did not get the job for which he had been groomed his whole life, nor did he get the opportunity to oppose his uncle's selection. When considering the effect of such an action, he would probably have decided against contesting the election so as to avoid alienating public opinion. The Presidential election of 2000 is a prime example of how quickly public opinion can sway in the space of a few days. In Hamlet's case, his campaign would expose a rift in the royal family that could threaten national stability.

At school, his life would probably have been structured and he would probably have become accustomed to attending lectures, engaging in debates, and, as he notes in his comments to the Players, frequently amusing himself at the theatre and avidly reading reviews of productions:
I heard thee speak a speech once, but it was never acted; or if it was, not above once, for the play. . . . But it was—as I received it, and others, whose judgments in such matters cried in the top of mine—an excellent play, well digested in the scenes, set down with as much modesty as cunning. I remember one said there were no sallets in the lines to make the matter savoury, nor no matter in the phrase that might indict the author of affectation, but called it an honest method, as wholesome as sweet, and by very much more handsome than fine. (2.2.434-445).

By contrast, Elsinore is a hot-bed of political intrigue, a castle of rumour and spying, both necessary to, and by-products of, politics. The lack of availability of any of the arts is apparent from the greeting the Players receive when they arrive.

At school, Hamlet would also have been exposed to creative writing which allows him to write lines to insert into The Murder of Gonzago. He also has experience of how live drama affects an audience, and employs this skill to gage Claudius' guilt. With such an education, it would be impossible for Hamlet to undertake so serious an action as the assassination of an incumbent king without exploring all his options and their contingencies. When he does act in haste, the result is the murder of Polonius. He knows full well that he has procrastinated, but makes the conscious decision to only act when he deems the time to be right. His hand is forced by Claudius' continued treachery and the murder of his mother.

When Hamlet leaves Wittenberg for his father's funeral, he returns to a world in chaos. Most of Shakespeare's plays illustrate a break in the socio-political order and Hamlet is no exception. The old King has died, the new King has been installed, and the old Queen has married the new King. In a sense, the old Queen becomes the new Queen for a second time. Such complications are indicative of the instability that accompanies shifts in power. Other indications are reflected in the preparations for war, the apparition of the Ghost, and Hamlet's assessment of recent events to his friend, Horatio:

> Horatio. My lord, I came to see your father's funeral.
> Hamlet. Pray, do not mock me, fellow student;
> I think it was to see my mother's wedding.
> Horatio. Indeed, my lord, it followed hard upon.
> Hamlet. Thrift, thrift, Horatio! The funeral baked meats
> Did coldly furnish forth the marriage tables.
> (1.2.176-181).

The disorder has filitered down even to the guards, one of whom, Marcellus, observes: 'Something is rotten in the state of Denmark' (1.4.90) It is no wonder then that Hamlet takes so long to reach the point where he has no other choice but action. He has a long journey to make from the young man fresh from university, thrown into a world of political intrigue that no education has adequately prepared him for, to the man who accepts his fate as his father's avenger and not king. Along the way, he has exposed us to many truths about the human condition, has demonstrated what may possibly go on behind closed doors, but ultimately, proves to us the futility of fighting Fate.

**Essays: The Character of Ophelia: Why Does She Go Mad?**

Since the first staging of *Hamlet*, the very name of Ophelia has become nearly synonymous with that form of female madness that was once termed "melancholia" and marked by a nostalgic state of depression, a dissociation from reality, and a self-destructive drive. Not only does Shakespeare's Ophelia display all of these symptoms, the change that we see in her is shocking. Prior to her re-appearance as a mad woman in Act IV, scene v, Ophelia is first presented in Act I, scene iii in a carefully balanced exchange with her brother,
Laertes. She then proves herself to be a sensible daughter to Polonius, agreeing to end her budding romance with Prince Hamlet. The cause of Ophelia's transformation appears to lie in the play's central Act III: at its start, Ophelia is brutalized by Hamlet's cutting, lewd rejection and by its end, her father Polonius has been incidentally killed by her former lover. These are powerful traumatic blows, and the gist of mad Ophelia's ditties and ramblings about lost love and death underscores their mutual confusion in her distracted mind. But Shakespeare did not create the character of Ophelia to serve as a clinical case study in female dementia; there is more to her madness than lost love and a father's death can explain.

Throughout the play, Shakespeare reminds us that Ophelia and Hamlet were lovers before its opening act. In her first exchange with Polonius, Ophelia says of Hamlet "He hath, my lord, of late made many tenders/Of his affection to me" (I, iii., ll.99-100). The fact of Hamlet's one-time affection for Ophelia is ironically affirmed in the rejection scene that begins Act III. And, finally, at her burying ground, as he grapples with Laertes, Hamlet declares, "I lov'd Ophelia. Forty thousand brothers/Could not with all their quantity of love/Make up my sum" (V, i., ll.269-271). But Shakespeare never shows us the two as lovers and the only direct reflection of their romance appears in a love letter poem written by Hamlet in which he entreats Ophelia to "never doubt I love you" (II, ii., l.119). The words of this piece and the sentiment it conveys, however, are oddly trite and banal, especially in light of the verbal facility that a deep Hamlet has already disclosed in Act I. Moreover, in his first soliloquy (I, ii), Hamlet proclaims "Fraility, thy name is woman!" (l.146). The woman that Hamlet has in mind is, of course, his mother Gertrude, and her "fraility" lies in her hasty widow's marriage to her husband's brother. But Hamlet couches this oath in generic terms and makes no exclusion of Ophelia, for whom the word "fraility" proves a far more accurate descriptor. All of this casts some doubt about the strength of Hamlet's love for Ophelia and the significance of his rejection of her as a cause of her insanity.

This suggests that lost love is not the event that triggers Ophelia's madness, but that it is the death of her beloved father, Polonius, which pushes her beyond the brink. Laertes finds this to be the case (IV, v., ll.161-163), and when the mad Ophelia sings of "him" lying in the ground and the need for her brother, Laertes to know of it, her brother's diagnosis is reinforced. Yet at the same time, Ophelia's songs and her dissociated statements abound with lewd puns that are strongly reminiscent of Hamlet's cruel, sexual wordplay in Act III, scene i. Indeed, when Laertes says that his sister's madness is the result of her love for Polonius, not only does this ring in an association with Hamlet, we also recall that while Ophelia is a dutiful daughter who takes commands from her father and reports progress made in carrying them out, she is not especially affectionate toward him.

Ophelia's madness is not the straightforward result of her father's death, and when we turn to the text we find that the seeds of Ophelia's madness may have been planted long before they flourish in Act IV. In the rejection scene (Act III, scene i) Ophelia is subjected to sharply contradictory signals from Hamlet. After she tries to return keepsakes to him, Hamlet says "I did love you once" (III, i., l.114) to which Ophelia innocently replies, "Indeed, my lord, you made me believe so" (l.115). But from this touching profession, Hamlet moves in the space of a few lines to the incredibly cruel "Get thee to a nunnery, why would'st thou be a breeder of sinners" (III, i., ll.118-119).

Although the suddenness of the turn amplifies the shock that Ophelia (and the audience) feel, this is not the first time that Ophelia has been exposed to a mixed message. On the overt level of deliberate action, Ophelia has first been directed by Polonius to break off all contact with Hamlet, and she agrees to do so without protest in the last line of Act I, scene iii, "I shall obey my lord" (I.136). But then, for the sake of the king, Claudius re-directs Ophelia to engage Hamlet in conversation without revealing the true purpose behind his instructions. At the behest of unknown forces, Ophelia is compelled by her constant duty as a daughter to act in opposite ways. But beneath this, at a subconscious level, Ophelia is the recipient of mixed messages about her identity, specifically about her sexual identity, from Polonius. After she tells her father about Hamlet's recent "tenders" toward her in Act I, scene iii, Polonius first scoffs, "Affection, puh!" He then chastises her for her naiveté as a "green girl" being toyed with by Hamlet, but then tells her to protect her "maiden presence."
Is Ophelia to be a knowledgeable woman rather than a "green girl" or is she to be a chaste virgin?

Further angle on this question and what it means for Ophelia's madness can be developed by looking at the issue of her death. In Act IV, scene vii, Gertrude describes Ophelia's drowning to Laertes and implies that she "fell" into a brook and was pulled down by the weight of her water-soaked clothes to a muddy death (IV, vii. II.166-182). The veracity of this report is immediately called into question by the two clowns of the graveyard scene (V, i.). In their vulgar discourse about the deceased, they question the coroner's official finding that Ophelia died an accidental death and is therefore entitled to a Christian burial prohibited to those who take their own lives. "How can that be, unless she drown'd herself in her own defense?" (V, i., l.6), one clown remarks, suggesting that Ophelia's suicide is common knowledge and alluding to Church law's exception on suicide by victim's of rape. The summary judgment lies with the doctor of divinity who presides at Ophelia's funeral, who says: "Her death was doubtful./And but that great command o'ersways the order,/She should in ground unsanctified been lodg'd/Till the last trumpet" (V, i., ll.228-230). Shortly thereafter, the learned cleric makes an off-hand comment about Ophelia's "maiden strewments," an odd coupling of words given virginity's association with intact order and "strewments" connotation of dishevelment (V, i., l.233).

Did Ophelia commit suicide? The answer is yes, but the issue is not so simple as this. The Queen puts out an official version of her death that stands in opposition to both common belief (as expressed by the grave-digging clowns) and religious forensics, but neither verdict tells the whole story. Unlike the dying Hamlet, there is no Horatio to tell Ophelia's story aright to the world. As we look back over the play, we find that it is through Ophelia that the tale of Hamlet's feigned madness is related to us. It is she who sketches the portrait of a "mad" Hamlet with his "doublet all unbrac'd" (II, i., l.75), and following his inexplicable cruelty toward her in Act III, scene i., she cries out to heaven, "O, what a noble mind is here o'erthrown!" (III, i., l.150). Ophelia describes and interprets Hamlet's madness, but she cannot tell her own story because the messages that she has received about who she is and how she is to act have been completely contradictory. Long before her father's death (itself inexplicable) or even her rejection by Hamlet (through polar shifts in the designation of Ophelia's nature), the daughter of Polonius is headed toward self-destructive madness as she tries to negotiate the roles of "knowing woman" and "chaste virgin" without the anchor of self-definition.

Essays: Rosencrantz and Guildenstern

At the conclusion of Hamlet, as the Prince, Laertes, Claudius and Gertrude all lie dead, an ambassador from England arrives on the scene with the blunt report that "Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead" (V, ii., l.371). The inclusion of this news seems like deliberate overkill on Shakespeare's part, for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are relatively minor characters and we have already been led to surmise from Hamlet's report to Horatio that his duplicitous school chums have been sent to their death as an artifact of the Prince's ruse. The phrase itself would serve as the title of modern playwright Tom Stoppard's black comedy Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead (1967), in which the two characters are resurrected as innocents confronting death in a situation that they do no begin to understand. Other than as material for a future playwright, the question naturally arises: why did Shakespeare insert these tandem characters into Hamlet?

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern appear together (as they do throughout the entire play) first in Act II, scene ii, having been summoned to court by their King and Queen, Claudius and Gertrude. They are identified as long-time friends of the Danish Prince by the Queen, who says that she knows of no other two men living to whom her son "more adheres" (II, ii., l.21). They are warmly greeted by Claudius who presents them with a twofold task: to cheer his morose stepson and to discover the source of Hamlet's discontent. Shortly thereafter, they are reunited with the Prince, who greets them as "excellent good friends," and inquires about how they each are (II, ii., l.224). Their replies are indistinguishable, each claiming to be as "indifferent children," happy in not being over happy, Guildenstern saying that "On Fortune's (cap) we are not the very button," with Hamlet adding that nor are they the "soles" of Fortune's shoe. When they reappear in the same scene, Hamlet
slyly reveals his knowledge that they have been summoned to court by the King to spy on him; his companions admit that they have come back to court at Claudius's behest but do not acknowledge the function that they have agreed to perform for the King. In the very next scene of the play, they report back to Claudius. They tell the King that they have not been able to find out much of value from their conversations with Hamlet, and that they directed his attention to a company of actors that they met along the road to Elsinore. Both the motivation and the competency of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are called into question by these early events.

When we look back at their first audience with Claudius and Gertrude, we find that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are not in Denmark for their friend's sake. What they want is not to serve Hamlet at a time of stress, but to serve the King as agents of whatever he has in mind. Thus, when Claudius and Gertrude ask them to carry out the twofold mission of bucking Hamlet up and getting to the bottom of his alienation, Rosencrantz first asks both majesties to put their entreaties in the form of a command rather than a mere request. Guildenstern then adds: "But we both obey/And here give up ourselves, in full bent,/To lay our service freely at your feet,/To be commanded" (II, ii., ll.29-32). What the two want, above all, is to serve their superiors without assuming any moral responsibility for the actions that they undertake.

By the mid-point of the play, the nature of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's orders have changed. No longer do they or the King maintain the pretense of helping Hamlet, for now Claudius says of his stepson, "I like him not" (III, iii., l.1). Guildenstern justifies his prospective part in escorting Hamlet to England by alluding to the welfare of all Denmark's citizens who are fed by the king; Rosencrantz adopts the same line, speaking about the "cess" (or "scope") of majesty and the "massy wheel" of sovereign power. By the time they depart for England, Hamlet is fully aware that his friends are acting in the King's hire, telling Gertrude about "my two schoolfellowes,/Whom I trust as I will adders fang'd" (III, iv., l.205).

Do Rosencrantz and Guildenstern know that they bear an execution order for Hamlet to the English king? Most critics believe that they are unaware of what Claudius has in mind. But ignorance is not innocence, especially when the actors in question have expressed their willingness to go beyond steps meant to help their friend to actions intended to assist their King at Hamlet's expense. Looking back, the faith that Claudius puts in the talents of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern is sorely misplaced. Not only are they unable to glean any useful information from Hamlet, they inadvertently direct his attention to the coming of the players, giving the Prince the foreknowledge that he needs to "catch the conscience of a king" through the play-within-a-play. Thereafter, they fail miserably in fulfilling the King's command to find and retrieve the corpse of Polonius. When Rosencrantz implores Hamlet to hand over the body, the Prince calls him a "sponge" who "soaks up the King's countenance, his rewards, his authorities" (IV, ii., ll.15-16). Lastly, they fail to escort Hamlet to his death and proceed in ignorance to their own.

At start of play's final scene (V, ii) Hamlet reveals to Horatio how he amended the King's letter, and Horatio realizes that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern have been sent to their doom. Hamlet then issues the next to last word on the pair, telling Horatio: "Why man they did make love to this employment./They are not near my conscience. Their defeat/Does by their own insinuation grow/'Tis dangerous when baser nature comes/Between the pass and fell incensed points/Of mighty opposites" (ll.57-61). At bottom, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern have volunteered to act as pawns in a game that they do not understand (they are not aware of Claudius's murder or of his lethal intentions toward Hamlet), in which they are readily sacrificed. Hamlet has personal motivation but delays acting upon it despite the Ghost's command: Rosencrantz and Guildenstern have no personal motives beyond ingratiating themselves with the powerful but they are nonetheless willing to perform any act as they are commanded to do.
Essays: Is Hamlet Sane?

With the coming of Freudian theory in the first half of this century and the subsequent emergence of psychoanalytically-oriented literary criticism in the 1960s, the question of Hamlet's underlying sanity has become a major issue in the interpretation of Hamlet. While related concern with the Prince's inability to take action had already directed scholarly attention toward the uncertainty of Hamlet's mental state, modern psychological views of the play have challenged his sanity at a deeper, sub-conscious level, typically citing self-destructive and, most pointedly, sexual drives to explain his behavior, his words, and the mental processes beneath them. In a play with undertones of incest and heavy doses of sexual word-play, critics using diverse psychoanalytical approaches to Hamlet have generated new (and sometimes plausible) readings of Shakespeare's best-know tragedy. But even if we forego this maze, the issue of Hamlet's basic sanity is worth re-examining from a modern perspective.

There is a distinct division of opinion among the other characters of the play about Hamlet's sanity and the split is along gender lines. Ophelia (Act II, scene i.) and Gertrude (Act III, scene iv.) both state that Hamlet is "mad," Ophelia reporting his dishevelment to her father, the Queen being unable to see or hear her son's final exchange with the Ghost of her husband. The major male characters, on the other hand, see with Polonius (II, ii.) that there is "method" in Hamlet's "madness," that his insanity is a surface mask to shield him as he plans the darker purpose of revenge.

Since Hamlet is understandably disturbed by the sudden death of his father and his mother's hasty marriage to his uncle, King Claudius, the abnormality of his behavior is to some extent also understandable. Hamlet is naturally withdrawn, dark, and morose in the wake of these traumatic events. And, by the same token, he gives vent to his abject mood with lines like "How (weary), stale, flat, and unprofitable/Seems to me all the uses of this world!" (I, ii., ll.133-134). His self-exile and his self-reproach are essentially normal reactions to a series of events that he must avenge at his dead father's grave command but without further direction against a powerful adversary in the guilty King.

Moreover, Hamlet plainly does use the guise of madness toward tactical ends. He keeps Claudius, Polonius, and the other males of the play (Rosencrantz and Guildenstern) off balance, unsure of the specific threat he poses but themselves unable to act quickly because of it. It is under cover of madness that Hamlet presents his customized "mousetrap," his "play-within-a-play," to successfully "capture the conscience" of the King. He sees through the King's plot to have him executed in England, his innocent escorts being unaware of the threat that Hamlet poses to the King. Such deliberate acts in which the appearance of madness is used to advantage are not those of a madman. To be sure, Hamlet sees and speaks with a ghost, but the rational character of Horatio does the same. All of this suggests that Hamlet, while depressed, guilt-ridden, and raging inside, is sane.

On the other hand, in his treatment of Ophelia, his former lover, Hamlet displays a cruelty that is extreme, abnormal and, in fact, psychopathological. His declaration, "Get thee to a nunnery, why would'st thou be a breeder of sinners" (III, i., ll.120-121), is so vicious in its utter rejection of Ophelia's tender efforts to understand him, so lewd in its punning suggestion that Ophelia is a "whore" ("nunnery" being a vulgar Elizabethan term for brothel), and so conclusive in its denial of womanhood that we are shocked by it. Leveled against the most (and only) delicate personality in the play, we are bound to blame Hamlet's inexplicable brutality toward Ophelia as out of character even for a naturally disturbed young man acting under the guise of madness. Worse, there appears to be no good end served by Hamlet's crushing of the only flower in the Danish court. Hamlet does not advance his plans by turning Ophelia further into madness; indeed, he "accidentally" kills her father, driving her onward to suicide. In a character who harbors so deep an animosity toward his own mother that he is specifically prohibited from acting upon by his father's authority, Hamlet's hyper-aggressive displacement of wrath upon Ophelia could certainly serve as a psychiatric
condition warranting further diagnosis, evaluation, and treatment. On these grounds at least, Hamlet's underlying sanity is subject to question.

**Essays: The Ghost: Is He Really Hamlet's Father?**

Hamlet is not the only Shakespeare play to feature the appearance of an apparition or ghost. Great Caesar's ghost appears to Brutus at Sardis, a procession of eleven ghosts curse Richard III before the battle of Bosworth Field, the spirit of Banquo haunts Macbeth at his banquet. But none of these effigies has the presence or the dramatic function that Shakespeare imparts to the ghost of Hamlet's father. It is through the ghost of Ur-Hamlet that the Danish Prince (and the audience) learns of the "foul and most unnatural murther" committed by Claudius. One of the stage roles that Shakespeare himself is believed to have performed on occasion, the Ghost of Hamlet speaks at length, appears in four scenes, and establishes the basic dramatic problem as the need to exact revenge against Claudius. "'Tis very strange," Hamlet remarks to Horatio when his constant friend tells him about the spectral figure who walks the castle's walls at night. While all of the other ghosts who materialize in the Bard's plays can be dismissed as emanations of a "villain's" guilty conscious, the ghost of Hamlet is seen (and heard) by several characters who have had no part in his death and is not seen by a character, the Ghost's widow, Queen Gertrude, whom we might expect to harbor guilty feelings. Given the ways in which the Ghost of Hamlet differs from his peers in other Shakespeare tragedies, we are virtually invited by Shakespeare to contemplate "what" and "who" he is.

The process of establishing whether the ghost of Hamlet is real and is really the Prince's father unfolds in stages. In the first phase, it is Hamlet's steady ally Horatio who serves as our guide to how real the Ghost may be. Marcellus tells us that an "apparition" has been afoot two times prior to the start of the play's action and then says to Barnardo that "Horatio says 'tis but our fantasy, /And will not let belief take hold on him" (I, i., ll.23-24). Horatio's skeptical resolve is blasted asunder when the Ghost appears "in the same figure like the King that's dead." (I, i., l.41). Although the Ghost refuses to speak with him, after this initial encounter, Horatio allows that it harrows him with "fear and wonder" (I, i., l.45). When Barnardo then asks him, "Is not this something more than fantasy?" (I, i., l.55), the levelheaded Horatio admits that he now believes that the Ghost is more than a figment, having seen it with his own eyes.

Horatio, Marcellus and Barnardo then try to determine what the Ghost is by discerning the reason for its appearance within a framework of current events and Christian folk beliefs. After Horatio speaks with the other members of the night watch about the possible threat of invasion by the Norwegian army of Fortinbras, the Ghost comes on stage again; Horatio connects the two, speculating that the apparition has some urgent matter of state to convey. He asks the Ghost directly about this, but he then tosses in an alternative pretext for the apparition's appearance, guessing that the Ghost may have hoarded treasure away for which "they say" the spirits of the dead walk the earth (I, i., l.136). The effort to pinpoint why the Ghost has materialized then shifts to Christian folk superstition: the members of the watch note that the Ghost vanishes at break of day "like a guilty thing" (I, i., l.148), that may be understood in light of beliefs about the Lenten season. At the end of the first scene, we are convinced that the Ghost is more than a fantasy but that only the spirit himself can shed further light on who or what he is. We are further given to believe that this will require the Ghost to speak his piece and that, as Horatio intuits, "This spirit, dumb to us, will speak to him" (I, i., l.171), that is, to Prince Hamlet.

In the next scene, Horatio tells Hamlet about the Ghost. He initially relates this news as something reported by Marcellus and Barnardo, but he then admits that he too has seen this armor-clad spirit with the war-like visage of Hamlet's deceased father. While not buying into the story, Hamlet displays an open-mindedness to the reality of the Ghost. He asks Horatio whether the Ghost's face was "red" or "pale" and thereby plants the seeds for another phase in the determination of the Ghost's nature, red being associated with a demonic spirit, pale with a benevolent (or at worst, harmless) spirit. In scene iv of Act I, Hamlet and the Ghost come face to face.
The Prince is at once convinced that the Ghost has substance, calling him "King, father, royal Dane." Nevertheless, Hamlet is still uncertain about whether the figure he addresses is "a spirit of health or goblin damned" (I, iv., l.40). His misgivings about whether the Ghost's intentions are "wicked" or "charitable" are left open-ended. Indeed, when the Ghost beckons for Hamlet to follow him, Horatio warns that the spirit might "tempt" his friend toward a flood or a cliff, drawing him into a mad act of suicide as is the traditional way of evil spirits.

To listen to the Ghost, all such doubts are dispelled at once in Act I, scene v, as Ur-Hamlet speaks with his son in private and proclaims: "I am thy father's spirit" (I, v., l.9). This claim is reinforced by the level and the kind of detail that the Ghost uses in describing how Claudius poured poison in his ear as he lay napping in the orchard. The Ghost's off-hand remark that it was his custom to rest in the shade at this time of day lends credibility to his story; his instruction that Hamlet must leave Gertrude's punishment to heaven further establishes the Ghost's identity as her former husband and Hamlet's father. But the matter of whether he is a good or an evil spirit remains ambivalent. The Ghost says to Hamlet that he is condemned to walk the earth in torment until the "foul crimes done in my days . . . Are burnt and purg'd away" (I, v., ll.16-17). This statement presumably refers to the crimes committed against him by Claudius, but it may also refer to sins committed by Ur-Hamlet during his reign. Clarification of this issue is pre-empted by the Ghost's claim that he is forbidden to tell the secrets of his "prison-house" limbo state.

After these revelations have been conveyed to him and the Ghost has temporarily left the stage, Hamlet affirms the reality of the Ghost and its identity as the spirit of his father, saying to Horatio and Marcellus, "Touching this vision here,/It is an honest ghost, that let me tell you" (I, v., ll.137-138). For the purpose of enlisting their cooperation in his mission of revenge, Hamlet swears Horatio and Marcellus to secrecy, and, from under the stage, the Ghost commands the two to swear by Hamlet's sword. Thus, not just Hamlet, but two other characters hear the ghost speak. Nevertheless, Hamlet does not fully trust the credibility of the Ghost's story. In Act II, scene ii, he wonders aloud about the Ghost's veracity, stating in a soliloquy that the Ghost might be lying to him about Claudius in order to tempt him into murder and eternal damnation. Whether as a pretext for delay or due to genuine uncertainty, Hamlet does not believe in the Ghost's tale enough to act until it is confirmed by the king's reaction to the "Murder of Gonzago."

After Act I, the Ghost puts in another appearance in Act III, scene iv. Set in the chambers of Queen Gertrude, the Ghost now dressed in a night gown reiterates his instructions to Hamlet about leaving his mother's fate to heaven. Nothing new is added to the Ghost's message, but Shakespeare now makes it plain that his form is invisible to and his words are inaudible to his "most seeming virtuous queen." Gertrude says to her son: "Alas, how is't with you,/That you do bend your eye on vacancy,/And with incorporeal air do hold discourse?" (II.116-118). When she asks what he is looking at, Hamlet blurts out, "On him, on him! Look how pale he glares" (I.123). The Queen again makes it plain that she neither sees nor hears anything but "ourselves," and when the Ghost exits for the last time she tells her "mad" son, "this is the very coinage of your brain" (III, iv., l.137). By this juncture, we are convinced that Gertrude is wrong about the Ghost, for the Queen is wrong about much else in the play, being kept in the dark by her false second husband.

It is significant that the Ghost does not appear at the end of the play. The final judgment about Hamlet's story is not given to the character who provides the Prince with motive and mission, but to Fortinbras, an individual who moves about in the real world of politics and military conquest. This may imply that there is no conclusive answer to the question of whether the Ghost is really Hamlet's father and that like so many issues raised in the play, the precise nature of the Ghost is ambiguous and need not be resolved to grasp the meaning of the tragedy before us.
In Act I, scene iii of *Hamlet*, the character of Polonius prepares his son Laertes for travel abroad with a speech (ll.55-81) in which he directs the youth to commit a "few precepts to memory." Among these precepts is the now-familiar adage "neither a borrower nor a lender be" (l.75) and the dictum: "This above all: to thine own self be true,/And it must follow, as the night the day,/Thou cans't not be false to any man "(ll.78-80). The occasion of the speech has been established in advance, for in the previous scene, Polonius has told the King and Queen that he has granted his son permission to extend his studies in France. This seems to be an eminently reasonable decision by a father concerned with his son's welfare and the moralisms that comprise the speech in question sound good. Indeed, the phrase "To thine own self be true" remains in widespread circulation today, having resounded through the ages in such literary works as Henrik Ibsen's play *Brand*. But when we take it at more than face value, there is less here than meets the ear, for we are left with the question of what "to thine own self be true" actually means.

*Hamlet* is a work in which words and acts are often at odds with each other, and in trying to discern what Polonius's most famous bit of advice to his son means, we must turn to their speaker and to his actions. The next time that Polonius appears on stage in Act II, scene i, we realize that he is not merely a concerned father, but a domestic plotter who does not trust his beloved Laertes to follow the precepts that he sets forth for him. Instead, Polonius dispatches his servant Reynaldo to spy on Laertes while the youth is in Paris. The royal counselor does not simply direct Reynaldo to keep an eye on Laertes. Instead, he orchestrates tactics that will enable his parental emissary to ingratiate himself with those "Danskers" in Paris that are part of Laertes's circle. He tells Reynaldo to impute "forgeries" on Laertes's character that are not heavy enough to slander the youth's reputation but common enough to serve as probes. He even supplies Reynaldo with a script, coaching him to bring up the subject of Laertes by saying "I know the gentleman, I saw him yesterday, or th' other day . . ." (II, i., l.53). From this we can immediately glean that Polonius is something of a hypocrite: on the surface, he extends trust to Laertes and to the boy's willingness to act according to the platitudes of the "to thine own self be true" speech. In reality, Polonius does not trust his son nor the capacity of adage to keep him on the straight and narrow.

Polonius appears in the next scene of Act II in a comic light. In the course of his report about Hamlet's behavior to Claudius and Gertrude, he proclaims that "brevity is the soul of wit" after and before long-winded passages that envelop this dictum. The clash between Polonius's praise of verbal concision and his actual verbosity is highlighted when the Queen urges him to get to the point with "more matter with less art," to which Polonius responds, "Madam, I swear I use no art at all" (II, ii., ll.95-96). Immediately thereafter, Polonius becomes the butt of the "mad" Hamlet's humor, as the Prince directs insults toward this official of state who senses the animosity being sent his way but fails to appreciate its nuances.

It is important to note that Polonius has already told his daughter Ophelia to cease all contact with Hamlet and to return his love letters. This behavior establishes Polonius as a stereotypical blocking character, a father barring the way between his daughter and a young man. Shakespeare was certainly familiar with such characters from his reading of the Roman comedy playwright Plautus's works. Moreover, Polonius's characteristic penchant for empty talk proclaims him to be a stock character of the Italian Commedia Dell-Arte theater, a pompous "Pantaloons" modeled, in turn, upon the "irate father" figures of ancient Roman comedy. Consistent with this stereotypical nature, Polonius interprets Hamlet's madness within the "boy loses girl" framework of Plautus's amusing stage works: he believes that his command to Ophelia to end her relationship with the Prince that had driven Hamlet to distraction.

At this point, the meaning of "to thine own self be true" seems plain: the phrase means nothing at all, it is simply an empty platitude that a character like Polonius would utter and thereby reveal himself to be a Pantaloon. But Polonius ventures beyond the boundaries of comedy by involving himself in what he takes to
be the affairs of another disturbed family, Hamlet's. He gives Claudius and Gertrude love letters written by
Hamlet to Ophelia (II, ii); he directs Ophelia to engage Hamlet in conversation while he and the King
eavesdrop (II, ii), which she dutifully does in the first scene of Act III. Shortly thereafter, Polonius tells
Claudius that Hamlet is on his way to Gertrude's quarters and volunteers to spy on their meeting. Here we
note that this device implies that the Queen cannot be trusted to give an accurate report of her son's words and
demeanor to her own husband. As with Reynaldo in Act II, Polonius even coaches Gertrude about what to say
to her son in order to draw him out.

Believing the "rat" behind the curtains in Gertrude's chambers to be Claudius, Hamlet stabs Polonius. Hamlet
expresses mild regret that he has killed the wrong man, saying "Thou wretched, rash, intruding fool,
farewell!/I took thee for thy better" (III, iv., ll.31-32). Yet it is evident that Hamlet is not deeply disturbed by
the death of Polonius, for he immediately shifts gears and launches into a diatribe against his mother's
infidelity. His final word on Polonius is "to be busy is some danger" (III, iv., l.33).

That is precisely the point: having apprised his son to steer clear of all extraneous involvements, Polonius has
inserted himself into affairs that are beyond his domestic sphere as father to Ophelia and Laertes and, in fact,
beyond his comprehension. He is a comic figure misplaced in a tragic world whose demise comes about when
he violates his own platitudes. In the end, his speech to Laertes in Act I is ironic, especially the "to thine own
self be true" motto. Not only does Laertes act rashly when he learns of his father's death, he acts falsely by
using a poisoned rapier in his duel with Hamlet. On one level, then, "to thine own self be true" is just a vapid
stock phrase; on another plane, it carries a tragic irony as Laertes realizes to late that his failure to be "true"
results in his death and that he has been "false" to another man, Hamlet.

**Essays: Minor Characters and the Number Three**

According to Colin Wilson, author of *The Occult*, some people believe that numbers have an influence on
human affairs. It is well known that the Elizabethans were more superstitious than most, and the influence of
numbers can readily be seen in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. There are two women (Gertrude and Ophelia), two
uncles (Claudius and Norway), and six countries (Denmark, England, France, Germany, Norway, and
Poland), the result of two times three. The number three itself is a major, though often neglected, motif of the
play. Wilson comments on its significance:

> Three: the number of versatility and plenty; traditionally lucky (‘three times lucky’); people
> with the number three are gay, charming, adaptable, talented, lucky, but inclined to be 'other
> directed', living too much for the approval and liking of other people.¹

A close analysis of *Hamlet* reveals how very appropriate this description is for Shakespeare's play.

When the play first opens, we meet two of the three soldiers that will appear on stage, Marcellus and
Bernardo. These two men form an important bridge in the play between the common people outside Elsinore
who are affected by the happenings within the castle, and the people within Elsinore's walls. They are the
observers of 'unnatural' events and the episodes caused by the politicians, and it is Marcellus who observes
'Something is rotten in the state of Denmark' (1.5.90). As members of the guard, they must adapt to the
changing from the reign of King Hamlet who had taken them into a war against Norway and the new king,
Claudius, who is preparing to defend Denmark from invasion by Norway. By the play's end, it is they who
have escaped the carnage, but not the invasion. They must adapt once more at the end of the play to the new
Norwegian king, Fortinbras.

The third soldier is the Captain of Fortinbras' army, who voices the mission of the Norwegian army as Hamlet
is being escorted to England by Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. He tells the Prince that the army goes to fight
for a piece of land in Poland that is not worth very much except in terms of honour. Metaphorically, this is an encapsulation of Hamlet's problem: his assassination of Claudius is not worth very much except to him as revenge for his father's murder. It is a domestic problem, not a political one. In the Captain's case and Hamlet's such a tiny action can still have far-reaching effects. The Norwegian victory in Poland allows Fortinbras to turn his attention to Denmark, while Hamlet, returned from England, so distracts the villainous Claudius that Denmark is unprepared for invasion. For these three soldiers, adaptability and versatility necessitated by their military training proves to be the provider of lucky circumstances for survival.

The opening of the play also introduces us to Horatio, Hamlet's close friend, who shows himself to be a loyal, true friend to Hamlet, a sharp contrast to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern who appear later in the play. Within this circle of three friends, all 'gay' and 'charming', there is only one in whom Hamlet can have unshakeable trust: Horatio. It is Horatio who, alone at the play's end, can relate the story

Of carnal, bloody, and unnatural acts,
Of accidental judgments, casual slaughters,
Of deaths put on by cunning and forced cause,
And, in this upshot, purposes mistook
Fall'n on th'inventors' heads.
(5.2.383-387).

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern meet immediate death in England, and this fact emphasises their roles as outsiders in the events of the play. Ultimately, their fate as two school friends equates with that of the two women and the two uncles.

The number three is apparent in the number of sons, Hamlet, Laertes, and Fortinbras, to an equal number of fathers, King Hamlet, Polonius, and old Fortinbras. These relationships are uncannily parallel. Laertes is sent to France to learn dagger, rapier, and other pugilistic arts:

He [Lamord, a Norman warrior] made a confession of you,
And gave you such a masterly report
For art and exercise in your defense,
And for your rapier most especial,
That he cried out 'twould be a sight indeed
If one could match you.
(4.7.96-101)

Hamlet is sent to Wittenberg where he pursues the arts and can write and direct plays:

Speak the speech, I pray you, as I pronounced it to you, trippingly on the tongue. But if you mouth it, as many of our players do, I had lief the town crier spoke my lines.
(3.2.14)

The two young men are obviously on different career paths. Hamlet and Laertes are almost professional students at foreign schools, Hamlet in Germany, Laertes in France, preparing for the day when they must assume their leadership roles, whereas Fortinbras has seemingly completed his education and is plying his trade as a military and political leader in Norway. While King Hamlet killed Fortinbras's father over a mere wager, Hamlet will mistakenly kill Laertes' father through misjudgment. Laertes will lead a rebellion into the very heart of Elsinore. All three will seek revenge for their fathers' deaths. Fortinbras alone will achieve his goal.
The three fathers also merit a look. Both King Hamlet and King Fortinbras have had hopes that their sons would become King. Apparently they were both loving fathers, since Hamlet is in deep mourning for the death of his father, and Fortinbras is raising an army to avenge his father under the pretext of invading Poland. Polonius, the one father whose parenting skills are on display for us to watch and ponder, is not only a careful father, but also a politically astute one, who could very easily use his children for his own advancement, as evidenced by his hiring of Reynaldo to spy on Laertes while he is in France. Polonius' manipulation of the Ophelia-Hamlet affair results, he thinks, in Hamlet's madness. His motivation in both instances is that he does not want any untoward behaviour on the part of his children to reflect on him. As unfatherly as that may sound, Polonius' death, nonetheless, is the catalyst that drives his daughter to real madness. Furthermore, all three men have acted rashly, interfering in affairs they thought they could handle, and all three have met violent death.

Of the three, only King Hamlet returns from the after-life to spur his son on to revenge, hardly the act of a loving father. If King Hamlet had had Hamlet's best interests at heart, he would have stayed dead and buried. For him to seek revenge over an act that could never be reversed demonstrates his own desire to get even with his brother, a matter that was Hamlet's to resolve. In addition, he couches his request in the one statement that he knows will affect his son: 'If thou didst ever thy dear father love . . . Revenge his foul and most unnatural murder' (1.5.24, 26). At this point in the play, we know that Hamlet is in acute emotional turmoil from dealing with the public funeral of his father who died while he was away, the shortened mourning period, and the remarriage of his mother to his uncle. In such a state, Hamlet's response must be emotional, not rational. Later in the play, Hamlet will do his best to verify the Ghost's story to make sure he was not having a reaction caused by grief.

In a sense, Hamlet is indeed 'three times lucky' through three escapes. He escapes from a murder charge for the death of Polonius, he escapes from the pirates that attacked his ship, and he escapes from the death warrant sent by Claudius to England via Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. While these may seem to be plot machinations to add to the intensity of the drama, they are also events which underline his belief that his destiny is tied to the Ghost's behest.

The motif of the number three can also be found in the political aspects of the play. At the beginning, Claudius sends two ambassadors, Cornelius and Voltemand, to reach a negotiated settlement with old Norway, Fortinbras' uncle. In the final scene, immediately after Fortinbras invades Elsinore, the English ambassador arrives to announce 'that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead' (5.2.373). It is Horatio who answers both the ambassador and Fortinbras, saying that Hamlet 'never gave commandment for their death' (5.2.376). In all the chaos, we may have forgotten that Hamlet changed the names on the death warrant. However, in the interest of political expediency, and to avoid the maligning of his dead friend, Horatio acts in an honourable fashion, saying that any more comment 'while men's minds are wild' will probably cause 'more mischief/On plots and errors [to] happen' (5.2.396-397).

The play ends as it had begun: two men, one Dane and one Norwegian, trying to reach a peaceful settlement. There is nothing more that can be done for the dead, except to bury them. And there will be more than three funerals: Gertrude, Claudius, Laertes, and Hamlet. For them, their number is up.

Notes


**Essays: To See or Not to See: Fortinbras in Two Film Productions of Hamlet**
Shakespeare's most famous play, *Hamlet*, exists in three versions known as the First Quarto published in 1603, the Second Quarto published in 1604, and the text in the First Folio (1623). All three versions differ from each other, and are often combined to make what editors call a conflated text. The version that is taught in many schools and used by most performance people is the conflated version of Hamlet that has 3760 lines.

Of the film versions now available on videotape, two have been demonstrated to be more popular than any of the others: Franco Zeffirelli's 1990 version with Mel Gibson and Glenn Close, and Kenneth Branagh's effort with himself and Julie Christie. As with the texts of *Hamlet*, there are many differences between the two films, but perhaps the most significant is that Zeffirelli omits the character of Fortinbras, and Branagh keeps him. Shakespeare clearly felt that Fortinbras' influence was necessary to the thematic threads of the play, and possibly reinforces this importance in the character's name and development beyond the traditional sources. The name Fortinbras has its root in two Latin words: *fort* meaning strong, and *bras* meaning arms. Horatio answers Marcellus' questions about what is going in Elsinore by relating the story of the battle between old King Hamlet and old Fortinbras. The emphasis throughout Horatio's story of the single combat between two mature, experienced men is on the legality and contractual nature of the arrangement. By contrast,

\[
\text{... young Fortinbras} \\
\text{Of unimproved mettle hot and full ...} \\
(1.1.95)
\]

has resorted to raising an illegal army without commission in Norway. He has made 'the levies/ The lists, and full proportions' (1.2.31-32) for this army without his uncle's knowledge or permission. According to Horatio, Fortinbras 'sharked up' (1.2.98) this army, and Shakespeare invokes the image of a ruthless sea predator attacking swiftly and killing silently to help us visualise this man. Fortinbras is a proactive personality who will fight for what he considers an honourable cause, a view confirmed by an inactive Hamlet:

\[
\text{... Rightly to be great} \\
\text{Is not to stir without great argument} \\
\text{But greatly to find quarrel in a straw} \\
\text{When honour's at stake.} \\
(4.4.53-56)
\]

Although Shakespeare only devotes sixty lines, strategically scattered over the five acts of the play, to Fortinbras and the threat that he poses, these lines give momentum to Fortinbras' political importance to the events in Denmark. But Fortinbras is an overbearing presence in silent, non-political ways.

The Ghost of Hamlet's father, a symbol of Denmark's past greatness as a military power, contrasts sharply to the present threat of Fortinbras from Norway. Claudius raises the issue of Fortinbras right after he announces his marriage to Gertrude to the court, sending Voltemand and Cornelius to Fortinbras' uncle to bring the young man into line. Their success in this mission deepens not only the court's confidence in Claudius's political skills but also the contrast between Claudius and Hamlet. But perhaps the most important role of Fortinbras is as the third son in the play's father/son motifs of Hamlet/King Hamlet, Polonius/Laertes, Fortinbras/King Fortinbras. Given Fortinbras' importance to the play, it is interesting to compare the Zeffirelli and Branagh versions to see what is lost or gained by this character's exclusion or inclusion.

Zeffirelli only retains approximately 1178 lines (thirty-one percent) of the conflated text, and deliberately transposes, interpolates, and rewrites Shakespeare's play, reshaping the text into a viable screenplay, not only reaping box office benefits but also incurring the wrath of purists. Zeffirelli explains his sound, directorial reasons behind the cuts:
... when you go into the kingdom of cinema, you must obey the laws of that kingdom. You must have a point of view, make a really precise choice as to what you want to show.¹

Having established his point of view on the main character, Hamlet, Zeffirelli bends the text to that view, beginning his film with a long shot of Elsinore reaching into the sea with the word 'Hamlet' boldly emblazoned on the screen. He makes no attempt on Shakespeare's authenticity: this film 'is based on the play by William Shakespeare. Screenplay by Christopher De Vore and Franco Zeffirelli.' The director supports his dissection of the text with logical visuals; for example, when Claudius and Gertrude enter Hamlet's dark room, Gertrude moves the huge window covering and the room is filled with sunlight on 'I am too much in the sun'.

Like Branagh, Zeffirelli has fashioned a context in which Shakespeare's words can live as they were written (more or less) but which also have a particular relevance to a modern audience. Since he has chosen to focus on the domestic tragedy in Elsinore, that of a son who cannot fathom his mother's remarriage nor seems to find time to exact revenge for his father's murder, he is perfectly justified in his comments:

Once you have focused on that story, all the other stories fall like dead branches. Who needs the political thing? Who needs Fortinbras? Who needs Norway?²

Fortinbras would be misplaced in this adaptation. The focus on the double domestic problem eliminates any need for a political dimension. Throughout the film, Claudius and Gertrude are portrayed as a sexually vital couple, a happy match, which intensifies Hamlet's jealous rage which reaches full fury in the closet scene. However, Zeffirelli also includes the Polonius family as a vital ingredient, making his film an essay on the play, one with a wider view. Fortinbras and war have no place in this interpretation. Claudius, even without the additional emphasis of his political capabilities, is still a complex villain, and because of the solidarity of the Polonius family, Ophelia's distress at his murder and Laertes' motivation for fighting Hamlet are very clear. The need for Laertes to be a premonitory event before Fortinbras' entrance in 5.2 is negated, and the resolution of the domestic tragedy precludes the need for further comment by Fortinbras or Horatio.

Zeffirelli is more dependent on his film editor than on the camera man, and this editing adds another layer to the already edited text. The continual, rapid cutting makes this film entirely a 'hands-on' Hamlet. Although the placement of Fortinbras throughout the play does more than add a political gloss, the actor Paul Scofield who played the Ghost defends Zeffirelli's omissions:

... since Shakespeare's audience often could not see the actor's eye or expressions, Shakespeare tended to repeat key ideas. With the close-ups of film, there's no need.³

Apparently, Kenneth Branagh saw things differently in 1996 and demonstrated that perhaps there was a 'need' for filming the full text of Hamlet. Released in the same year as Four Weddings and a Funeral, the Branagh Hamlet was nominated for four Academy Awards. It was known as the 'eternity' Hamlet because its running time was 232 minutes. Branagh had stated that he believed that the characters of the play 'can be understood in direct, accessible relation to modern life'.⁴ In fact, however, much of length is attributable to Branagh's cinematic additions, what is known as 'extra-textual' business. In regard to Fortinbras, these extra-textual images expand the role of Fortinbras even further into the affairs of the Danish court, from his first mention to the film's conclusion.

Set in 'an impression' of nineteenth century Europe, the film preserves the fear and uncertainty initiated by the appearance of the Ghost and the preparations for war.⁵ The metaphor of war is essential to Branagh's interpretation, as are the inability to ascertain identity or truth and the question of kingship. Branagh's is the first film to allow Fortinbras complete inclusion, a decision which carries many benefits and many problems. When Claudius sends Voltemand and Cornelius to Fortinbras' uncle, Old Norway, the entire episode of
Fortinbras' raising an army is shown by a flashback-within-a-flashback. By inserting these flashbacks, Branagh can give the audience something to look at while the long speeches are spoken, creating a visual subtext:

It's the full text which means it takes four pages to say you're going for a walk. If the camera was still and you just photographed people saying the words, it would be terribly boring—you need the excitement to hold the audience.\(^6\)

Unlike Zeffirelli's film, Hamlet is not the centre of the Danish universe, merely a part of it, tempered by the presence of Fortinbras. On film, Fortinbras is the essence of the shark: his approach has been soft and he attacks swiftly. His coming into court at the film's end is diametrically opposed to any entrance by Claudius. His tactics are expedient and pragmatic in the world of politics, and, offering a true alternative to the unredeemably evil Claudius, 'What he sees shakes him to the core'.\(^7\)

There is a strong sense in Branagh's film that the events in Denmark are not only national, but quite possibly, international events, with far-reaching ramifications. Branagh's strong development of Fortinbras with textual and extra-textual support, especially in the last scene, caused one critic to comment:

By privileging Fortinbras' figure and fortune, Branagh's Hamlet becomes not the story of the prince's tragedy but a heroic tale of Fortinbras' inexorable rise to power.\(^8\)

Branagh's choice to give a fully realised Fortinbras confirms beyond all question the importance of this character to the events of the play.

If we view the screenplays and films of Hamlet as a piece of tapestry, we can see that the removal of even one thread causes distortion and damage to the entire work, but not necessarily to the destruction of the piece. Zeffirelli's film remains an absorbing, psychological study of the play's domestic and sexual themes, letting the fabric of the play be seen in a particular light. The story may be less rich and powerful, but it still provides a satisfying cinematic experience.

Branagh's film presents the 'complete' play, but in spite of the Oscar nominations, it failed to realise its box office potential. For educational purposes, the production company edited the film down to about an hour and a half—all Shakespeare and fewer extra-textual moments. It is still the only version that includes the entire conflated text.

Understanding the practical and creative process of film-making and the myriad decisions that accompany a film project, especially that of a Shakespeare play, allows us to appreciate Shakespeare's plays as living artefacts, amenable to changes that can enrich Shakespeare's overall design for his characters when his text is set down in a screenplay and brought to filmic life. Other films, especially Baz Luhrmann's Romeo and Juliet, have demonstrated beyond a doubt that 'the play's the thing'.

NOTES

2. Ibid
5. Kenneth Branagh. Trailer for Hamlet on videotape of Othello (USA, 1994)
7. See footnote 4.
8. Robert F. Willson, Jr. 'Kenneth Branagh's Hamlet or the Revenge of Fortinbras'. The Shakespeare
Essays: Hamlet and Macbeth: A Comparison

The purpose of this paper is to discuss two of Shakespeare's greatest tragedies, *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*, to compare the themes, characters, and the conclusion of each play, and to focus in particular upon the concept of evil as it is treated by Shakespeare in each play. Each play primarily concerns the downfall of a man who has the potential for greatness, but finds himself caught in a web of evil woven by others. In the case of Macbeth, we have a man led by greed, an uncontrollable appetite for power, and the urging of an insane wife, who in the course of the play, turns from a noble man into a monster. Hamlet, on the other hand, is led to his end by a desire for revenge which he allows to go out of control, and by the continued contact with his mother, whose part in his father's death haunts him.

In the tragedy of *Macbeth*, the theme of evil is introduced and sustained by the witches, and by Lady Macbeth. Macbeth himself becomes a victim of the impulses within him which lead him to consult these vile creatures, and to believe in the power of evil rather than the power of good. The tragedy here is that Macbeth possesses a potential for goodness and nobility which he is led to deny; he is an imaginative man, with a mind which could have been turned to creative governing, but which is instead filled with dreams of ghosts, and of his victims. Macbeth "is a doomed man before he even commits his crime. He knows it, and the witches know it. It is what gives to this tragedy its deep and appalling quality. Macbeth does not go to hell; he starts there.”

On the other hand, the evil in *Hamlet* is one which develops in the course of the play, for in the very beginning Hamlet himself is not a man capable of the murder of Polonius nor of his mother and the king. Thus the evil here is not yet a reality for the audience of this play when it begins; the witches in *Macbeth* do not function in the same way as does the elder Hamlet's ghost. The ghost tempts Hamlet to revenge, but not to ambition or to power; the revenge itself need not be the source of evil, for according to the beliefs of the day, the murder of a rightful ruler could justly be revenged by his son. Thus, while the two plays have similar auras surrounding the evil events which transpire (mysterious doings at night, witches and ghosts), they stem in conception from two very different approaches to the problem of evil. Perhaps the divergence is best pointed out by the fact that Hamlet is at first inclined to believe that the ghost is an agent of the devil; he is not prepared to act until he is certain the ghost has told the truth. Macbeth, on the other hand, knows that only the evil way of the witches will lead him to fulfill his ambitions, and he consciously chooses that evil over the good qualities, such as loyalty, towards which he is drawn.

Although the fate of Hamlet and Macbeth is resolved in much the same way at the end of each play, the two characters could not be more different in conception. Hamlet is, and remains throughout the play, a noble and essentially well-intentioned man; he is an idealist—a man not afraid to follow his emotions. Macbeth, a much stronger and more decisive man than Hamlet, has a streak of selfishness and stoicism which Hamlet lacks. Shakespeare thus approaches a similar theme—the murder of a king—from the viewpoint of two very different men, and yet finally arrives at a single philosophical position which is based upon a single human principle: violence engenders violence, and murder ultimately brings about the death of the murderer as well as innocent victims.

An interesting contrast between the two plays is the importance of Lady Macbeth to Macbeth and of Gertrude to Hamlet. In both cases devotion to the woman—wife or mother—and a concomitant fear and repulsion towards her, acts as a prime factor in the decision making process of the man. But Macbeth envisions a throne which he will share with his Queen, while Hamlet can feel nothing but rage against his mother's betrayal of his father. Macbeth is joined in his choice of evil by his wife, while Hamlet falls into evil alone. There is no equivalent to Ophelia, with her influence towards salvation for Hamlet, in *Macbeth*.
While avoiding the question of a Freudian interpretation of Hamlet's character, it is interesting to note that the genesis of his drift into evil is more understandable and more forgivable than Macbeth's. It has been said of Hamlet that "Blocked by the double obstruction (the death of his father and the marriage of his mother to his murderer), his life energy flows backward and floods his mind with images of disintegration and death." Hamlet was not made for revenge, was not meant to bear the burden of his own mother's evil, and yet both fell upon him. Macbeth, on the other hand, was a brave man and a strong leader. He could have accomplished much on his own. He was not a victim of his parents, nor even of his king, for the king in this case was a good man. There is ample indication in the text that Macbeth possesses the strength of character to resist his wife's ambitions for him. Yet he falls more easily than Hamlet. "The murderer of Duncan inherits Hamlet's sensibility, his nervous irritability, his hysterical passion, his extraordinary gifts of visualization and imaginative expression; and under the instigating influence of his wife the 'rashness' and 'indiscretion' of the later Hamlet are progressively translated into a succession of mad acts." 

If Macbeth is Hamlet taken to the limits of his violent potential, the more accurate comparison between characters in these plays would involve Claudius and Macbeth. The murder of a good king by a usurper invariably brings about an uncontrollable chain of events which will eventually ruin that usurper in Shakespeare's world. Yet as horrible as Claudius' deed was, we do not feel the repulsion for him that we feel towards Macbeth. Claudius stands outside the circle of violence until Hamlet draws him in, at the last moment. Macbeth is in the center of his play, his hands bloody after every murder.

Despite the murders in which Hamlet is involved—the deaths of Polonius, Claudius and Gertrude, and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern—and the madness of the innocent Ophelia, many critics have found it difficult to see in Hamlet an embodiment of evil. Rather, "Hamlet is the quintessence of European man, who holds that man is 'ordained to govern the world according to equity and righteousness with an upright heart', and not to renounce the world and leave it to its corruption. By that conception of man's duty end destiny he is involved in those tragic dilemmas with which our own age is so terribly familiar." Thus the evil deeds which occur are at least partially neutralized by Hamlet's intention to eradicate far worse evils, according to this interpretation. Is it possible that Macbeth too can be seen in this light. It has been argued that despite his crimes, "Macbeth is the protagonist, the hero, with whom as such, for the right tragic effect, there must, naturally, be some large measure of sympathy." He gains our sympathy through Shakespeare's "power of poetry . . . by the exhibition of the hero's bravery and virtue at the beginning, by emphasizing the influence of the supernatural . . . and of his wife's inordinate ambition distinctly mentioned. . . ." Thus while the dramatist must make his audience aware of the fall into evil of both men, he must also make provision for the tragic element, which presupposes a capacity for goodness and even greatness on the part of the hero.

The answer to the problem of evil in each play is that "Shakespeare has again enclosed his evil within a universe of good, his storm center within wide areas of peace." This world of good includes Malcolm and Macduff, Ophelia, and all the others who survive to carry on the job of building peace on the ruins of war, and of healing violence through their gentleness. The tragedy of both Hamlet and Macbeth, "imaginative brothers," is that they are both capable of reflecting back to their innocence, which has been irretrievably lost:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{The time has been, my senses would have cool'd} \\
\text{To hear a night-shriek, and my fell of hair} \\
\text{Would at a dismal treatise rouse and stir} \\
\text{As life were in 't, I have supp'd full with horrors;} \\
\text{Direness, familiar to my slaughterous thoughts,} \\
\text{Cannot once start me.} \\
\text{(Macbeth, V, v, 10-15)}
\end{align*}
\]

Notes


3. Ibid. volume II, p. 111.


6. Ibid.


Bibliography


**Essays: The Theme of Pretense in Shakespeare's Hamlet**

First published in a 1952 issue of *The Yale Review*, Maynard Mack's essay "The World of *Hamlet" remains one of the most widely-cited explications of that Shakespearean tragedy. As Mack observes, *Hamlet* is the most "elusive" of Shakespeare's works, for the dramatic world that the Bard created in this play is "a world of riddles" that are not conclusively answered by its end and, in fact, appear to have been deliberately intended to create doubt in the eyes of the viewer (1952/1964, p.45). Mack identifies three salient attributes that pervade the "world" which Shakespeare created in *Hamlet*; its mysteriousness, its stress on the "playing" or pasts, and, most relevant to this essays’ particular concerns, "the problematic nature of reality and the relation of reality to appearance" (p.48). In *Hamlet* "things" are often not what they appear to be on the surface. This is most evident in the kingship of Claudius, who seems to be a competent and legitimate sovereign, but who is, at bottom, the murderer of his own brother. It is also apparent in Hamlet's feigned madness and the other forms of duplicity and deceit that move the plot forward. But as we shall proceed to explain in the analysis at hand, the contrast between "reality" and "illusion" is more than a matter of individuals being ignorant of the machinations of other characters. As Mack argued some fifty years ago, the play is essentially about "seeming" and "appearance" as an inherent dimension of human experience.

In Act I, scene ii, Hamlet appears as a sullen figure lurking in the background of the court. His withdrawn demeanor is understandable given that his father died just two months earlier. Nevertheless, his mother, Queen Gertrude, asks her son why he cannot accept ur-Hamlet's death as a natural occurrence that must arise for all mortals, questioning, "Why seems it so particular with thee?" To this, the Danish prince replies:
Seems, madam? Nay, it is, I know not seems.
'Tis not alone my inky cloak, good mother,
Nor customary suits of solemn black. . . .
Together with all forms, moods, shows of grief,
That can denote me truly. These indeed, seem,
For they are action that a man might play:
But I have that within which passeth show—
These but the trappings and suits of woe.
(I, ii., ll.76-86)

In this, the first extended speech by the play's main protagonist, the audience is directed to consider the difference between "seeming" and "real" grief. Indeed, this passage encompasses a complex fabric of elements which, as we shall soon see, articulate the dichotomy between reality and appearance.

This is not the first instance in which the term "seems" rises to prominence in the play. We recall the Ghost's denunciation of his "seeming virtuous queen" (I, v., l.46), and, above all the exchanges between Hamlet and the members of the night watch about the nature of the apparition that has appeared to Horatio and his cohorts on the walls of Elsinore castle. In this context, we note the repetition of the word "assume," as in the apprehensive observation that the Ghost "hath power to assume a pleasing shape" and in Hamlet's vow that he will speak to the Ghost "if it assume my noble father's person." The word "assume," of course, can connote the conscious "taking on" of an appearance that is at odds with underlying reality. In this instance, Hamlet and his friends are clearly justified in their misgiving about whether the Ghost is a spectral embodiment of the dead king or some "thing" that is merely pretending to be ur-Hamlet, the devil, for example. The entire play proceeds on the word of an apparition, for it is from the Ghost that we learn of Claudius's true iniquity and, hence, of the need to exact revenge upon him. Nevertheless, the possibility remains that the Ghost (and his tale) is false, the product of some evil spirit intent upon misleading Hamlet (and other characters of the play) into mad and heinous actions. This possibility is reinforced when Hamlet reproaches Gertrude in Act III, scene ii, for while Hamlet sees the ghost again, his mother sees nothing at all. From the time of the ghost's first appearance (indeed, from the preliminary reports of the night watch), like Hamlet, we confront the uncomfortable situation of being unable to trust our own senses.

Before Hamlet's utters his retort about "seeming" in the second scene of Act I, we are faced with the character of Claudius, and we soon learn that he is not only a man who is hiding something, he is a man who is pretending to be a virtuous regent, but who has, in fact, "poisoned the ear" of Denmark (I, v., l.136). Later on, as Hamlet stages his "mousetrap" for Claudius, we are told that he and Horatio are watching the King's behavior "in censure of his seeming" (III, ii., l.92). Claudius himself "confesses" that he is a foul usurper, and that he must engage in deception to keep his crimes secret. But as Cedric Watts (1988) has noted, his past sins apart, Claudius appears to us as a competent monarch, capable of commanding loyalty and of skillfully handling affairs of state. "Even if he is only playing the part of a rightful king," Watts says of Claudius, "he does so with skill and panache" (p.59). Claudius is plainly the "villain" of the play, but even on this count we have some doubts, for he displays features, such as his love for Gertrude, that underscore a duality in his character. Claudius is not what he seems, yet there remain questions about how great the difference is between a "false" and a "true" king. Hamlet repeatedly brings attention to the contrast between his father and his uncle, but he does so because Claudius presents an otherwise convincing portrait of a wise, benevolent ruler.

Then there is the character of Ophelia, who "seems" to be a beautiful, and above all, "innocent" virgin. With regard to his "beloved," Hamlet points to a "falseness" that simple is not congruent with what we see in the daughter of Polonius, repeatedly characterizing her as a whore masquerading as a maid. But even after her apparent suicide, questions remain about Ophelia. After all, she does willingly take part in the efforts of Hamlet's opponents to determine whether the Prince's madness is real or not. Moreover, suicide is not an action that we associate with a seemingly "pure" and "guiltless" maid. Is Ophelia what she seems to be, or is
there something valid in Hamlet's disparaging comments about her? We suspect the former, but as in the case
of the Ghost, we cannot be entirely certain.

In his response to Gertrude's question about why he cannot accept his father's death as a natural part of life,
Hamlet makes reference to his "inky cloak" as well as to other garments and trappings that give the outward
show of grief. Indeed, immediately before her son's speech, the Queen bids him to "cast they nightly colour
off" (I, ii., 1.68). Throughout the play there are numerous references to clothes and to costumes as a reflection
of character. For example, in his advise to Laertes, Polonius tells his son that "the apparel oft proclaims the
man" (I, iii., 1.72), and shortly thereafter, he characterizes Hamlet's profession of love to Ophelia as "false
apparel." The most noteworthy instance of external garments being used as an index to an internal reality
occurs when Ophelia reports to her father that she saw "Lord Hamlet with his doublet all unbrac'd. No hat
upon his head: his stockings foul'd, Ungartered, and down-gyved to his ankle" (II, i., ll.73-74). This disarray
of costume in Hamlet, who was once considered to be "the glass of fashion and the mould of form" (III, i.,
1.156), is taken as a sure sign that the Prince is mad. But we know that Hamlet is not (as) mad as he pretends
to be, and that his disheveled attire is merely part of an "act" meant to deceive Claudius and the other
members of the court.

According to Mack (1952/1964), "the most pervasive of Shakespeare's image patterns in this play . . . is the
pattern evolved around the words 'show,' 'act,' and 'play'" (p.52). As Hamlet himself proclaims, "the play is the
thing" by which he plans to ensnare Claudius in his own guilt and to expose his uncle for what he really is (II,
ii., 1.605). Several critics have observed that there is a marked disparity between Hamlet's "tough" talk about
exacting vengeance upon Claudius, e.g., his remark that he could "drink hot blood," and his otherwise passive
demeanor. Cedric Watts, for example, notes that "such conventionally vengeful speeches contrast so strongly
with the introspective sensitivity and humanity which Hamlet displays elsewhere that readers are usually
reluctant to take his words at face value." (1988, p.62). Here we note with David Scott Kastan (1995) that
Hamlet is "never quite as apt a revenger as either he or the ghost would like" (p.199). One explanation for
Hamlet's "failures" (including his famous failure to "act") is that Hamlet is unable to embrace the "role" of an
avenger. "It is legitimate to say that Hamlet is an actor who has been offered a choice of roles," Nigel
Alexander (1971) tells us, but Hamlet "is unable to determine which part he ought to play" (p.14). Hamlet is
confronted with the perceived need to "play" the avenger, but it is a part with which he has no natural affinity.
Hamlet attempts to "rehearse" this role and to gain the motivation to play the part through his soliloquies.
Nevertheless, until the play's concluding act, Hamlet is "ill-cast" as both "minister and scourge."

The theme of "play acting" is embodied in the performance of the Murder of Gonzago, the "play within a
play" which "tends to dissolve the normal barriers between the fictive and the real" (Mack 1952/1964, p.53).
On stage, we see both a "player" king and a real individual, Claudius, who is actually playing or pretending to
be Denmark's king. Hamlet goes so far as to direct the troupe in their task, telling the Player King "Suit the
action to the word, the word to the action, with this special observance, that you o'erstep not the modesty of
nature" (III, ii., ll.17-19). Here Hamlet advocates a "realistic" style of acting, one in which the line between
reality and illusion is all but obliterated. The Prince admires, even envies, the Player King's talent at assuming
a part and creating the illusion of a real person, "his whole function suiting/With forms to his conceit" (II, ii.,
ll.556-557). We gain the sense that the Prince wishes that he could be as convincing in his role as avenger as
the Player King is in his part on stage.

Returning once more to Act I, scene ii, Hamlet avows that he has something in his nature that "passeth" mere
surface appearance. By the graveyard scene, that "something" has come to the fore. It is through a
confrontation with his own mortality that Hamlet gains a sense of his nature that extends beyond external
appearances and assumed roles. As Mack notes, the connection between mortality and authenticity is innate in
human nature, "for death puts the question, 'What is real?' in its irreducible form and in the end uncovers all
appearances" (p.59). In the play's final act, Hamlet casts aside all external trappings of grief, madness, and
revenge, embraces the function (but not necessarily the character or role) of avenger assigned to him by
circumstance and attains an heroic authenticity as he proclaims himself to be Hamlet the Dane.

At the conclusion of the play, questions and quandaries remain with the audience. Shakespeare does not resolve the dichotomy between reality and illusion, leaving critics to argue endlessly about what actually takes place in the play. Still, we are left with the impression that Hamlet himself, through a confrontation with the ultimate reality of death, is sure of his own identity and that he wants it to be reported "right" to the world at large. The basic message conveyed is that there is, in fact, a difference between what seems to be and what is, but that mere mortals cannot discern it until they face the prospect of all "reality" being swept away by death.

Bibliography


**Essays: Analysis of Act Five of Shakespeare's Hamlet**

Shakespeare's *Hamlet* was first published in 1603, although it had been performed prior to that date. Today, it remains perhaps the best known play in the English language. The story is set in Denmark. The title character, Hamlet, prince of Denmark, is "... himself ... almost more of a satirist than a philosopher".1 Indeed, despite the play's undeniable status as a tragedy, its satirical and comedic elements often threaten to take precedence over the more sober, weighty considerations encountered within. Nearly every character of note dies, a kingdom changes hands, the fate of many rides in the balance. Furthermore, the reader cannot help but be somehow concerned (whether attracted or repelled, of course, is a matter of personal taste and interpretation) with the activities of the prince and how they effect those around him. "*Hamlet* is one of those plays in which the central character so occupies the attention that it is attractive to investigate the symbolic relationship of the other characters to him".2

Yet, part of Shakespeare's strength and attraction as a writer has always been the ability to draw believable, interesting characters of lesser rank in the proceedings, as well as providing them with dialogue and action which is simultaneously illuminating and propulsive (in terms of deepening and directing the plot). "The words of Shakespeare ... have in them all shades of ... meaning. Beyond this joy ... there is the added joy of character. ... no writer ... has touched the depth and height of character as ... William Shakespeare".3
This is apparent even so late in *Hamlet* as the Fifth Act (the last), where the courtier Osric and the gravediggers (or clowns) are introduced. These characters contribute, in their separate ways, to bringing about the conclusion of the drama, while reinforcing its central themes through their activities and speeches. At this seemingly late juncture in the play's progress, Shakespeare manipulates these characters so that their presence is far more meaningful to the play's final development than might ordinarily be expected by a cursory examination of their purported functions.

Long before the written word there existed in the human consciousness a belief of the power of prophecy in that period of time immediately preceding death. Its origin can perhaps be traced to the generally assumed "fact" that the soul becomes divine in proportion to the looseness of its connection to the mortal body. Shakespeare makes this consideration apparent with the opening words of Act Five, uttered by the first clown (he and his companion may also be identified as gravediggers because they are carrying "spades and mattocks" and they dig deep into the surface of the graveyard), who says: "Is she to be buried in Christian burial that willfully seeks her own salvation?". The reference to "salvation" indicates interest in the passage of the soul from the body; the "she" referred to is, of course, Ophelia, who took her own life in Act Four. The very setting of the graveyard is a predestination of coming events. By the end of the play Hamlet, Laertes, Gertrude and Claudius all join Ophelia in death.

Yet much of the conversation in the graveyard scene of the Fifth Act, Scene One, might be classified as "lighthearted banter," at least if taken only on a surface level. The clowns (gravediggers) speak of death in a manner that is simultaneously humorous and profound, displaying what has come to be called "black humor," speaking lines like: "Come my spade. There is no ancient gentlemen but gardeners, ditchers, and gravemakers; they hold up Adam's profession". This utterance is followed a little later by: ". . . the gallows is built stronger than the church . . ." and after that: ". . . 'a gravemaker': the houses that he makes last till doomsday.". Perhaps even more revealing is this interchange between Hamlet and the First Clown, where the prince asks: "' . . . Whose grave is this, sir?' [and the clown replies] . . . 'mine, sir'". The exchange between the two leads to the famous remark concerning Yorick's skull, which in turn leads to a short conversation between Hamlet and Horatio that ends with the observation: "Imperious Ceasar, dead and turn'd to clay, Might stop a hole to keep the wind away . . .", an apt indication of the fate (death and decay of the body) common to all humanity. It is also a cunning hint by Shakespeare of the coming death of the remaining leading characters.

If Shakespeare satirizes much of the human condition with the gravedigger characters, his use of the courtier Osric goes somewhat beyond this, although, once again, satire is central to the character's purpose. "We should not be surprised to find that Shakespeare creates a range of great satirists as well as tragic heroes, clowns, romantics, and warriors. . . . many of these . . . categories are intermixed in the satirist". Besides propelling the plot by conversing cleverly with the prince and delivering his message, there has been some speculation that Osric was instrumental in satirizing political events contemporaneous with his own day. Indeed, ". . . at the time he lived there was . . . an affectation of quaintness and adornment, which emanated from the Court . . . against which satire was directed by Shakespeare in the character of Osric in *Hamlet*". Osric, then, serves a twofold purpose: he simultaneously satirizes prevailing conditions in the English royal court while delivering the message to Hamlet which leads to the fatal and fateful duel between the prince and Laertes. Indeed

... Osric, the fashionable courtier, an object of . . . detestation . . . a pretty little man with nothing to recommend him but his wealth . . . clothes and . . . manners . . . comes to carry the King's request that Hamlet shall fence with Laertes. . . . this will be the end.

Therefore, rather than simply permit characters already in existence to carry the play to its end, Shakespeare introduces new characters in the final act who are not extraneous, but serve useful dramatic purposes. Whether these characters were introduced by the playwright out of necessity (i.e., the play might have lost momentum if existing characters were called upon to do the job the new ones do, etc.), is a question for literary critics to
decide upon. What is undeniable is that the gravediggers and Osric function admirably within the context Shakespeare provided for them, and Hamlet is stronger for their contributions.

Notes


Bibliography


Essays: Character Analysis of Horatio

Shakespeare’s Hamlet is dominated by the complex, absorbing character of its primary figure, that being the young prince Hamlet. There is scarcely a single scene in the play in which Hamlet does not greatly determine the course of the action either by his forceful presence or, in his absence, by the preoccupation of Claudius
and his cohorts as they plot to remove Hamlet as the major obstacle blocking the functioning of their regime. Keeping this fact in mind one must be exceedingly careful not to neglect the importance of the other characters, both principal and minor, in the play. In some cases their development as unique personalities, with identities separate and distinct from the purposes to which they are put by the dominant characters in the play, is not successfully accomplished, nor is it absolutely necessary that they are all seen as complete characters in order for the play to be a literary success. For example, Rosencrantz, Guildenstern, Marcellus and Bernardo are not exhibited as full blown personalities and it is not imperative that the reader know that much about their characters. Such is not the case with Horatio. Horatio is one of the major characters in the play and because of his central position as the personal confidant of Hamlet he appears frequently throughout the play and consequently we get to know him quite well.

In a play it is not always an easy task to reveal to the audience the inner workings of each of the characters. There are established and repeatedly successful ways of making the audience intimate with the personality of a character. However, not all of these literary techniques can be used on each and every character. For example, Hamlet reveals a great deal of himself during his introspective forays which reveal themselves to the audience in his numerous soliloquies. He is a troubled character beset with tremendous challenges and as such he is allowed to unburden himself by constant soul searching and the author, utilizing the appropriate literary style, lets the audience glimpse the inner workings of the mind of this person. Horatio is not afforded the opportunity to so reveal himself. And yet he still emerges as a well rounded person, although certainly not as fully revealed as is Hamlet, the King, or Polonius. The problem of developing the character or personality of a supporting player is succinctly summarized by the Shakespearean critic Granville-Barker:

> Horatio dwells in Hamlet's shadow, yet he is very much himself and (again) few things are more difficult in drama than to give a character standing of its own, except by setting it in opposition to others, and enkindling it, so to speak, by friction."¹

Horatio is with us throughout the entire play, dominating the first scene of the play and surviving the carnage of the last scene, and because of his close association with Hamlet and his longevity we get to know him quite well. A common observation of those who study the first scene is that Horatio is possessed of unusual intelligence. He does not show great fear in the presence of the ghost although he does react to the immediate appearance of the spirit with a combination of apprehension and fear:

> How now, Horatio!  
> You tremble and look pale.²

Horatio quickly conquers his fear and addresses the spirit. Marcellus and Bornardo react in an opposite fashion as is evidenced in a speech Horatio makes to Hamlet:

> whilst they, distill’d  
> Almost to Jelly with the act of fear,  
> Stand dumb and speak not to him.³

All things being relative we must compare Horatio's courage with that of Hamlet and doing so we find Horatio showing poorly in the comparison. Horatio, fearing that the ghost may assume an evil form and deprive Hamlet of his reason thereby drawing him into madness, forbids Hamlet to pursue the beckoning image of the dead kin. Hamlet rebuffs his futile attempts to restrain him and dauntlessly ventures forth.

Horatio does have the presence of mind to speak to the ghost and while speaking he vividly demonstrates the product of his formal studies at Wittenburg as he speaks to it in the classical language of the scholars. Once again referring to Granville-Barker we have his observation on Horatio's intelligence:
Within the opening framework of the play Horatio reveals that he is a well schooled individual. He is a learned man who can interpret within the framework of knowledge that was considered correct in his day, the actions of the ghost. He knows of some of the reasons why ghosts might be prompted to wander the earth and elaborates upon them to Bernardo and Marcellus:

> Or if thou hast uphoarded in thy life
> Extorted treasure in the womb of earth,
> For which, they say, you spirits oft walk the earth in death.

To the sophisticated reader this may sound like little more than the delusional whimperings of a man frightened by hobgoblins and beasties. Yet to the Shakespearean audience Horatio must have appeared to be both intelligent and brave. Intelligent because he knew the origins of supernatural belief and brave because he is willing to risk his life by confronting an actual ghost.

While Horatio is a scholar possessed of limitless intelligence, he seems to lack the spontaneity, creativity and free flowing wit which usually categorizes the extreme upper strata of the intellectually gifted. Nor does he possess the introspective bent of Hamlet, the guile of Claudius, or the wit of Polonius. One gains the impression that as a scholar Horatio must have been much as he shows himself to be in non-scholarly pursuits. He is a hard working, straight ahead type of person who attacks each problem which besets him by drawing on his store of knowledge. He never shows the capacity to improvise to any great extent nor does he dwell on larger than life issues as does Hamlet. This fact of Horatio's character is explicitly detailed by A.C. Bradley:

> . . . and it is noticeable that Horatio, though entirely worthy of his friendship, is like Ophelia, intellectually, not remarkable.

Horatio's inability, or reluctance, to dwell on philosophical questions of moral complexity is revealed in the fifth act of the play when Hamlet asks Horatio if he is not now justified in killing the King:

> . . . is't not perfect conscience
> To quit him with this arm? and is't not to be dam'd
> To let this canker of our nature come
> In further evil? [spoken by Hamlet to Horatio]

[Bradley's interjection] . . . He [Horatio] declines to discuss that unreal question, and answers simply,

> It must be shortly known to him from England
> What is the issue of the business there. [Horatio speaking to Hamlet]

> In other words, "Enough of this endless procrastination. What is wanted is not reasons for the deed, but the deed itself."?

Passing on from on analysis of Horatio's cerebral ability to come to another of his most dominant traits, that being his unstinting friendship with Hamlet. That his allegiance to Hamlet, revealed in the first act of the play, persists with unflagging determination through the many and varied personality changes of Hamlet is significant in itself. Horatio is a surprisingly solitary man. He does not have many friendships and consequently his allegiance, once offered, is not quickly withdrawn. He and Hamlet have known each other a long time, having been fellow students at the University of Wittenburg although you would not readily discern
this fact from the way Hamlet first greets Horatio in the second scene of Act I:

I am glad to see you well;
Horatio, or I do forget myself. 8

Considering that they have been students together and that the association was probably a long one inasmuch as Hamlet, although still a student, has reached the age of thirty his inability to immediately recognize Horatio is indeed strange. But perhaps it can be explained by the fact that he has been overcome with remorse and driven to a state of deep distraction by the death of his father and the hasty marriage of his mother.

Horatio is a loyal friend whose first duty always seems to be serving the prince Hamlet. Having witnessed the ghostly specter of the dead king in the first scene of the play he suggests:

Let us impart what we have seen to-night
Unto young Hamlet; for upon my life,
This spirit, dumb to us, will speak to him. 9

From the onset of the play Horatio expresses his friendship for Hamlet and in return Hamlet confidently reveals his plans for revenge to Horatio and as the plans assume greater and greater complexity and involve Hamlet in more complicated moral decisions Horatio is repeatedly turned to for support and guidance. When Hamlet learns of the foul murder of his father, and determines that he will revenge the act he confides to Horatio that in the future he may appear mad on occasion but that it is a madness with a purpose, a madness designed to distract from his primary intent. Horatio is the only major character in the play entrusted with this information and it is information, if once revealed to the King or Polonius, which would probably mean certain death for Hamlet. We therefore realize that Hamlet returns the confidence and faith that Horatio shows for him.

As Hamlet's plan to avenge his father's death unfolds, Horatio assumes more and more of an integral part in the action. The Player's Scene, certainly one of the most important scenes for substantiating the accusations of the ghost, sees Horatio assuming a role of crucial importance. During the play he is to keep a critical eye on the King and following the play he is to confer with Hamlet and corroborate or deny that which Hamlet himself observes during the play. In doing so Horatio helps to keep Hamlet from doubting his own senses and restrains him from believing that he is suffering from delusions.

The news of Claudius' ill fated effort to dispatch Hamlet once and for all by sending him to an ally who will see him executed must need be related by Hamlet to someone and not surprisingly he chooses Horatio. A small point perhaps but it once again reveals that Horatio is the one person that Hamlet can trust and the need for Hamlet to unburden himself of the inner workings of his mind seems great indeed at this point. To maintain sanity every human being needs someone he can confide in with a precise deal of honesty. Hamlet, who holds a precarious grip on his own sanity, has only Horatio to speak to honestly and frankly. Small wonder then that Horatio need be possessed of an even and honest temperament.

As the play continues to build rapidly to its bloody conclusion Horatio remains as Hamlet's one true ally. In the churchyard scene the intellectual shortcomings of Horatio are made abundantly obvious when, as Hamlet's faithful confidant, he accompanies him on a soul searching tour of a cemetery. During the first two hundred lines of the scene Hamlet broods on the meaning of life, the stark realization of one's true meaning which is made so vitally important by direct confrontation with death, and Horatio appears as someone who is there to listen and to comment or add very little to the conversation. For every seven or eight lines that Hamlet speaks Horatio adds scarcely one short utterance and it usually echoes the feelings of Hamlet without adding to the complexity of the thought:
Hamlet: That skull had a tongue in it, and could sing once; . . . that did the first murder! This might be the pate of a politician . . . one that would circumvent God, might it not?
Horatio: It might, my lord.¹⁰

And so the constructive phrases of Horatio come rolling out. We repeatedly see Hamlet dwelling on complex moral thoughts and Horatio, ever present, adding support with his stolidity and unambiguous reasoning.

Horatio, towards the end of the play, gives wise counsel to Hamlet but it is ignored. He impugns him to withdraw from the confrontation with Laertes, but, partly because his previous advice, though honest and direct, lacked foundation, he is ignored. In this case it proves disastrous for Hamlet who dies a treacherous death.

That his sense of loyalty is indeed strongly developed is without question when one considers that Horatio, faced with the terrible loss of Hamlet, immediately decides to commit suicide. Like the ancient Romans who served only one master Horatio considers that his life is to end with the death of his one true friend.

Horatio is also motivated by a commanding sense of pride in his country. With the stage strewn with the corpses of men who have plotted and connived in order to gain personal political advantage Horatio moves in to set things straight. Harboring no personal need for power he assumes the responsibility of carrying out the deathbed wish of Hamlet that Fortinbras should assume control of Denmark. In addition he plans a public address in which the people will hear of how their leaders usurped each others power.

The final scene completes the profile of Horatio and we see that he is, on occasion, capable of exceptional behavior. Having lost his best, and possibly only friend, he contemplates suicide only to bounce bade in a matter of minutes to see that everything is clarified and that justice is done. It reminds the reader of the skilled and experienced politician who assumes that the workings of state assume precedence over personal feelings of remorse occasioned by human tragedy.

In summation the character Horatio is a strikingly solitary person, holding only one true friendship, possessed of a deep love for his country and holding a simple moral system that sees wrong and tries to right it with straightforward action, noted for its simplicity and lacking the thinking that often hinders the actions of Hamlet. He is intelligent but lacking in introspection, wit, creativity and cunning. He experiences feelings deeply enough to contemplate suicide when his best friend and he are separated by death.

Possibly most important of all is his ability to survive. He is the only character of major significance who does survive at the end of the play. This simple ability to survive says an awful lot about a person, particularly a person in this Shakespearean play. It seems that the other major characters in the play, while not being totally evil, are possessed of flaws that do not appear in the character of Horatio. Lacking greed and personal desire for power he is not drawn into any of the deadly plots of the others.

Notes


2. Ibid. p.198.


5. Hamlet, p. 56.
Essays: Staging for Shakespeare's Hamlet: Act II, Scene ii, Lines 85-221

Act II, scene ii is set simply in "a room in the castle." As Claudius and Gertrude greet some of their guests—Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and the ambassadors from Norway—the room should be elegant and comfortable. As the set and costuming for this production is particularly understated, the room is suggested through the draping of five large swatches of diaphanous material—three violet and two grey (as opposed to the setting of the state room which is hung with many, multi-colored swatches of material). Two of these swatches—one violet and one grey—are draped across the length of the stage ceiling, while the remaining swatches are draped from the ceiling to the floor at several different points to suggest walls. A simple sofa/loveseat in grey is located downstage-right (and angled towards upcenter) and a large grey chair is located nearby, upcenter of the sofa. As the scene opens (at line 85) Gertrude and Claudius are standing immediately stage-right of center, watching as Voltimand and Cornelius depart downstage-left. Polonius is standing a little upstage-left, waiting to speak with Gertrude and Claudius.

Gertrude is tall and stately-looking but her smoldering sexuality somehow reinforces her regal quality. Her speech is measured and she weights individual words for effect. She is wearing a simple and form-fitting, floor-length gown in deep purple. Her long hair is drawn back from her face, up into a sleek silver crown, and then falls down her back. Claudius is also tall and stately—together he and Gertrude make an attractive pair, almost seeming to merge as one. They share the same physical coloring, which is particularly offset by the identical material and similar cuts of their costumes. In fact, during their time together on stage they often are touching one another, or standing with their arms about each other. Overall, Claudius' attitude is wary. Though he is very controlled in both speech and movement, one always has the sense that his temper, were he to demonstrate it, would be devastatingly violent. He wears a floor-length robe—in the same material as Gertrude's—open over a tunic belted with a long silver rope. He wears a more substantial crown than Gertrude's, also in silver.

Polonius wears a royal blue, floor-length robe belted at the waist with a rope in navy blue. He cuts a much less imposing figure than either Claudius or Gertrude—smaller in height, slighter in build, and less striking in physical feature. His speech is always self-conscious—moving between extremes of rapid-fast, nonsensical patter and ponderous, self-important proclamations and rhetorical declamations.

As Voltimand and Cornelius depart, Polonius moves down center to face Claudius and Gertrude as he says, somewhat offhandedly: "This business is well ended." Taking a deep breath—which causes Gertrude and Claudius to exchange a knowing look of knowing exasperation—Polonius launches into his "introduction" to the topic at hand. Between lines 86 and 92 Polonius is rapidly and excitedly babbling. He pauses self-importantly before declaring "Your noble son is mad." Just prior to this, Gertrude has left Claudius standing, facing Polonius, and gone to sit on the sofa—indicating that she knows Polonius is going to be too long in making his point. It is from here that she impatiently prompts Polonius with "More matter, with less art."
Here Polonius moves down right, past Claudius, to address Gertrude more directly. From lines 96 through 104 Polonius resumes his excited and nonsensical babblings, turning from Gertrude to Claudius and then back to Gertrude; he punctuates his word play on "effect," "defect," and "effect defective," with presumably unconscious hand gestures (right hand out, then left hand out, then right hand out, etc.). All the while, Gertrude and Claudius are growing increasingly impatient, with Gertrude staring pointedly at Polonius and Claudius occasionally shifting his weight from foot to foot.

As Polonius begins to read Ophelia's letter he moves down right, below the sofa, periodically turning in to check the effect of his words on Gertrude and Claudius. Gertrude attempts to speed him along with "Came this from Hamlet to her?", but Polonius will not be dissuaded and grandly (pretentiously) continues to read, slowly striding from downstage right to downstage left. As Polonius reads (from line 116 to 124), Claudius moves toward Gertrude and sits in the chair near her. They both begin to listen more attentively.

At line 125 ("This in obedience . . ."), Polonius moves back center towards Gertrude and Claudius, holding out the letter to show them. As Claudius says his line, Gertrude gestures to Polonius with her hand that she wants to see the letter herself. Before he hands it to her he responds to Claudius: "What do you think of me?" Reassured by Claudius’ response, he hands the letter to Gertrude and moves downstage-right, past the sofa. Cheating up towards Claudius he becomes more thoughtful in his wording of the following monologue. At line 143 (". . . she should lock herself from his resort"), he moves upstage-center, behind the couch, until he is positioned between (and behind) Gertrude and Claudius. Leaning in to them he relates his advice to Ophelia and on "by this declension, into the madness . . ." he stands—speaking with just a touch too much solemnity and earnestness.

Although the next exchange is clearly reserved for Claudius and Gertrude, Polonius has already moved center and around the chair, arriving stage left of Claudius to state "Tis so." Polonius again becomes obtuse with "If circumstances . . . within the center," but Claudius and Gertrude are now taken with Polonius' theory and no longer impatient. At line 163, Claudius stands to look back upstage-left, where Polonius is gesturing to the "arras." As Claudius and Polonius face each other talking, Gertrude spies Hamlet off downstage-left. She stands to announce his arrival and the three look off in that direction. Polonius instructs Gertrude and Claudius to leave and they exit by passing down right of the furniture, and then turning upstage right to exit off between the drapes, upstage-right.

Polonius turns to greet Hamlet, who now enters from downstage-left. Hamlet is an "average guy" in looks, build and stature. He is not as tall as Gertrude and Claudius, but he is close, and taller and better proportioned than Polonius. Though he is an "Everyman" of sorts, his courage and integrity are immediately apparent. His ability to live comfortably in his own skin—despite the suggestions of the "To be, or not to be" monologue—make him particularly attractive. For this alone, he is one of those individuals whom others believe to be better looking than he actually is. He is dressed in dark grey leggings and a lighter grey tunic, drawn by a black belt.

Hamlet enters in a "manic" state—intent on playing with Polonius. His responses to all Polonius' questions are larger than life—he speaks loudly and fervently. When Polonius asks how he is, Hamlet responds with gusto: "Well, God-a-mercy." His reaction to this simple question is so broad, so wild, that Polonius doubts that Hamlet recognizes him. Polonius moves down left to where Hamlet has stopped on line 173 and Hamlet leans in to peer closely at his face before loudly announcing "Excellent well. You are a fishmonger." They remain standing face to face for the next few lines until at line 181 ("For if the sun breed maggots . . .") Hamlet suddenly dashes by Polonius, jumps onto the sofa and his rant trails off with the word "carrion." He suddenly turns around and quite seriously asks Polonius if he has a daughter.

All the while, Polonius is rooted in his spot downstage-left—a little too intimidated to move. On Hamlet's next lines (185-187) he steps slowly and surely off the sofa moving deliberately towards Polonius until on
"friend, look to 't," he is actually nose to nose with Polonius. Immediately, Polonius takes the opportunity to 
break away with his aside, pushing past Hamlet and moving stage right. On "I'll speak to him again," (line 
192) he sits himself down on the sofa, facing Hamlet. Here Polonius assumes a condescending, paternal tone; 
he is going to "help" Hamlet by patronizing him. His question "What do you read, my lord?" is exactly the 
sort of irrelevancy which people, faced with an uncomfortable situation, employ in an attempt to regain 
control.

Hamlet's response is delivered with the same seriousness of tone with which Polonius asks his foolish 
question. The following is really a brief comic exchange, not unlike that of the Marx Brothers. When Polonius 
asks, "What is the matter?", Hamlet races over and sits on the sofa next to him and with great curiosity and 
eagerness asks "Between who?", as if he expects Polonius to tell him a secret. On "Slanders, sir . . ." Hamlet 
leaps up from the sofa, resuming his manic attitude and stalks towards center, around the back of the chair 
during his following lines, until he is directly behind Polonius on the sofa. On line 205 ("for yourself, sir . . .") 
he leans in and stage whispers into Polonius' ear. Polonius takes his aside while still seated, but then stands up 
with "Will you walk out of the air, my lord?" leaving Hamlet to topple dramatically over the sofa where, 
splayed out over the couch and partially on the floor he responds: "Into my grave."

Polonius does not know what to make of this show. He is embarrassed by the prince's lack of control and he is 
torn between suspecting Hamlet may be leading him on and believing Hamlet is mad in his love for Ophelia. 
During the aside beginning at line 211, Polonius moves back to center stage, ostensibly lost in thought but 
actually quite eager to get away from the deranged prince. It is from this point at center stage where he turns 
to Hamlet, still splayed over the couch but who is now "amusing" himself by playing with his hands and 
fingers and quietly humming to himself—seemingly lost in mad reverie. On Polonius' exit line, Hamlet 
grandy and somewhat jeeringly (and certainly sincerely) states that he is delighted to see Polonius go. As 
Polonius heads towards his exit downstage-left, Hamlet sinks to the floor off the sofa and repeats to himself in 
a preoccupied manner—"except my life, except my life, except my life."

This is the only brief glimpse we have into Hamlet's despair in this portion of the scene. It is a moment that 
stands out, not simply for the starkness of the language, but for the wild and boisterous manner with which 
Hamlet plays the entire rest of the scene, and which he abandons at the final moment. He is winded—given 
the acrobatics and theatrics of his encounter with Polonius—and this final mantra is the scene's comedown. It 
is not so much a climax as it is an anticlimax—a preparation for the theatrics yet to come.

**Essays: The Nature of Hamlet's Character**

The nature of Hamlet's character may well be the most controversial topic in English literature. Yet the 
background which frames Hamlet's character seems too uncomplicated to produce such controversy.

Hamlet’s father has been murdered with malicious premeditation and for the most reprehensible reasons. Not 
only has his being been defiled in order to attain these ends, but his memory has also been profaned in their 
coming to pass. Claudius and Gertrude are both complicit in murder; Claudius has violated the divinity of rule 
by committing treason; and Gertrude has gone against the tenets of custom and the sanctity of the marriage 
vows by so improperly displaying her lack of grief and allegiance to her husband. Hamlet’s duty then would 
seem clear and justified. How is it that he fails to take decisive action in the face of such overwhelming 
provocation?

    How stand I then, 
    That have a father killed, a mother stained. 
    (Act IV, scene iv)
Over this, the controversy rages.

Because his grounds for acting would appear to be many and obvious, some critics have asserted that his failure to act indicates timidity at least, if not outright cowardliness. But Hamlet is never portrayed as being sheepish, for as early as the first scene Horatio describes him as “our valient Hamlet” (Act I, scene i). His lack of action is not natural to his character then, and therefore it must be that there are underlying elements of the basic situation which keep him from taking what would otherwise be a direct course.

There are several of these subtle philosophical contradictions, but before examining then we must realize that from his perspective the grounds which appear so obvious to us are not quite so overt. He cannot take his extreme revenge until he is absolutely certain that his uncle has murdered his father. He is confident that he can always see through appearances to reality but later on he loses confidence in his own insight. His father's ghost seems to suggest his uncle is guilty, but is the ghost an apparation from Heaven, or from Hell?

The spirit that I have seen
May be a devil . . .
I'll have grounds more relative than this.
(Act II, scene ii)

The contrived play which Hamlet hoped would give him this more “relative evidence” seems to convince him of the ghost's validity when the king reacts in the anticipated manner.

I'll take the ghost's word for a thousand pounds.
(Act III, scene ii)

Hamlet, however, still finds reasons to put off his gruesome task. Finding Claudius at prayer, he convinces himself not to take the opportunity for revenge, since this would mean too good a fate for his uncle who gave no similar chance to his father.

Am I then revenged,
To take him in the purging of his soul,
When he is fit and seasoned for his passage?
(Act III, scene ii)

But is this his real reason, critics ask, or is he just rationalizing his inaction? Subsequent events would suggest that he is sincere. Thinking it the king behind the curtain in his mother's bedchamber in the next scene, Hamlet shows no hesitancy in doing away with him. If anything he is too hasty.

Shakespeare's construction here may have been more for dramatic effect than for consistency of character portrayal. By disposing of Polonius, Ophelia and Laertes (all innocent and well-intentioned bystanders) in such regrettable ways, Shakespeare heightens the overall sense of tragedy climaxed at the finish of the play.

That Hamlet has a strong sense of adherance to Christian ethics is attested to in many places. And perhaps this is the strongest consideration that enters into Hamlet's procrastination. In realizing the necessity of framing one's actions in deference to a higher authority than earthly expedience, Hamlet is a symbol for all mankind which cannot simply act to the limits of its power in order to gratify its personal immediate wants. This is the thrust of Hamlet’s famous soliloquy—"to be or not to be"—and is more the basic issue of the play than any other. If Hamlet is a coward in refraining from action it is only because

Conscience does make cowards of us all.
(Act III, scene i)
The basic fiber which his life is woven of is an oppressive sense of loneliness. On a symbolic level this loneliness is representative of each individual's isolation from all other men. Coupled with the acute awareness all men have of the speedy passing of time, of the impermanence this causes, of the inconstancy humans cultivate even in the face of this general mutability of emotion, Hamlet becomes a most effective symbol for the tragedy of all life itself. But his particular circumstance is worsened many times beyond this universal level of suffering.

When the knowledge of the travesty is revealed to him, Hamlet is saddled with the worst sort of duty. Because of this knowledge and because taking his uncle's life would make him king, Hamlet’s life is never to be his own. His hesitancy in revenging his father may be in part because it will only bring on another kind of burden—the burden of rule.

Love desired is always falling away from Hamlet. He feels he cannot turn to Ophelia; although perhaps mistakenly, for she is not really untrue to him, as she is only obeying her father as Hamlet is his. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are lost to his confidence because they have placed more faith in their loyalty to the kinship than to Hamlet's friendship. And so the prince is completely alone and his introspection intensified. The large number of soliloquies Hamlet utters, along with his constant double-entendre discourses with others, are effective devices to make the audience aware of Hamlet's disassociation with everything around him.

Totally alone, uncertain of the ultimate scheme to which he should be subject, Hamlet's procrastination is nothing worse than a cautious analysis of his position. Since most of the elements are abstract and indefinite, and since any one of them is important enough in itself to change the balance, his lack of action is carefulness, not cowardliness.

**Essays: Hamlet's Delay: An Objective and Subjective Analysis Compared**

One of the most perplexing problems of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, and certainly one which has received a great deal of critical attention, is the question of why Hamlet delays the killing of Claudius. The Prince eventually succeeds in avenging his father's death, but this occurs only in the play's final scene. Before that point, Hamlet has numerous opportunities to accomplish his task: the prayer scene, for example, in which both characters come face to face alone. Yet Hamlet demurs. On this matter critical opinion is divided into essentially two schools of thought. There are the "objective" critics who view Hamlet's delay as being externally determined: Hamlet does not act because of restraints which exist outside the workings of his own mind. On the other hand, there are the "subjective" critics who attribute Hamlet's delay to internal, i.e. psychological, forces operating within the Prince's mind.

We shall now turn our scrutiny to examination of two explanations of Hamlet's behavior, G. R. Elliott's argument in *Scourge and Minister*, representing the objective school and Waldeck's essay "Anxiety, Tragedy and Hamlet's Delay" providing a subjective argument. In *Scourge and Minister* Elliott initiates his explication of Hamlet's delay by asking yet another often overlooked question: Why does Claudius delay in killing Hamlet? Relatively simplistic answers have been offered to satisfy this point. It has been observed that Claudius does not simply execute the troublesome prince because of concessions to Gertrude and because he has just recently ascended to the Danish throne and does not wish to incur the emnity of the populace by killing a royal Dane. However, as Elliott contends, such explanations are far too superficial to explain Claudius' actions. We must recall, Elliott reminds us, that Claudius has succeeded in dispatching Ur-Hamlet in total secrecy and certainly he could have devised a similar clandestine fate for the son. Indeed, throughout the play, "his vicarious and elaborate plotting against Hamlet, while extremely clever...stands out otherwise in vivid contrast to the method of his initial crime." Elliott offers a preliminary explanation of Claudius' delay by noting that the new King, for all his faults, has a conscience and is, in fact, revolted by his past deed.
Elliott's analysis does not end here, however, for the critic has an aesthetic answer to the original question of Hamlet's delay. Hamlet's delay is part of an aesthetic design within the piece, as Elliott elaborates:

Parallel is the case of Hamlet. The main plot point which emerges in Act I is not merely the prince's delay: it is the delay of king and prince taking action against each other, each thereby laying up trouble for himself in the future. . . . The King’s postponing of action against the ominously hostile prince in the second scene prepares the way dramatically for the prince’s postponing of action against the murderous king in the fifth scene.

Hamlet’s delay then, according to Elliott, is part and parcel with Claudius' delay, the two phenomena reinforcing each other as elements in the work's aesthetic design.

To substantiate his thesis Elliott notes the similar states of mind evinced in the characters of Hamlet and Claudius during the pivotal prayer scene. Elliott analyzes the prayer scene in the following fashion:

Normally the king would have guarded himself at this juncture. Normally, but the point is that in the Prayer episode, as a result of the Play scene, Claudius's state of mind is abnormal, uniquely so, owing to a crucial conflict that is taking place within him. And the same is true of Hamlet. The two cases are designed by Shakespeare to play into, interpret and accentuate each other.

To demonstrate this point Elliot turn to a close reading of the text. He observes that the King's postponing words "prepare" and "forthwith" in the opening of the Prayer episode are dramatic antecedents of the Prince's postponing words at the close of the scene, "this physic but prolongs thy sickly days." Both Claudius and Hamlet are experiencing sharp inner conflict at this point in the play, and their similar states of mind complement each other. What is essential is that both Claudius and Hamlet, while committed to ultimate action, give indications of further delay during the prayer episode, and that this mutual posture contributes both to the broad action of the drama and to the specific language employed by the two.

Why then does Hamlet ultimately stab Claudius at the play's conclusion? Simply because at this point Claudius has resolved to take direct action against the Prince: he has handed him the cup and released Hamlet from his bond of delay. It is not until Claudius's direct attempt to do away with Hamlet that Hamlet can himself make a direct attempt on his uncle's life. It has been suggested that up until this point Hamlet is not yet fully convinced of the King's guilt, that Hamlet's action is triggered by Claudius's action but that this is essentially an internal and subjective determination. Elliot's analysis is quite different though, for what bars Hamlet from action is the aesthetic design of the play, the interweaving of the respective machinations of Hamlet and Claudius.

By way of contrast, Peter Waldeck in his "Anxiety, Tragedy and Hamlet's Delay", offers an internal subjective explanation of the Prince's failure to act directly. Unfortunately, the first half of Waldeck’s analysis is taken up with some vague ruminations concerning angst, cartharsis and tragedy, which in no way serve to expand and illuminate Waldeck's position in the manner in which the critic, presumably, expects. Despite this shortcoming, Waldeck, in the second part of his essay, does offer a cogent explanation of the Prince's delay. He observes that, "inhibitions are also not limited to the pathological, but include the quite normal, useful, perfunctory restraints, as well, many of which arise from the needs of civilization." Such is the case in Hamlet's delay for, "Hamlet's inhibition against killing is the concrete social reality of his opponent, and particularly his friendly or smiling face." Central to Waldeck's argument is the emphasis which is put upon the visage of Claudius. As the critic details:

Hamlet emphasizes the smiling Claudius while programming his task. It is particularly through the face that social presence and the cause of this inhibition manifests itself, and it is
specifically the smiling, civilized exterior of Claudius that concerns Hamlet when he writes in his tables.

The problem for Hamlet is to overcome this inhibition concerning the external civility of his intended victim which preoccupies Hamlet and dictates his behavior in the course of the drama.

Waldeck offers a powerful proof of his thesis through reference to three separate incidents before the final resolution. As to the dumb show sequence which Hamlet uses to confirm his suspicions regarding Claudius's role in his father's death, Waldeck states that it, "is intended to remove any doubt of his guilt and the same time to disrupt the paralyzing visage of 'custom' in a friendly countenance." Turning to the Prayer episode, Waldeck observes that prayer is a peaceful and contemplative activity in which the human countenance is refined and beatific. Hamlet would prefer to murder Claudius while he is "drunk asleep, in essence, when he has lost his civilized countenance and the play of his sins upon his unconscious visage is evident." Finally, in regard to the stabbing of Polonius, Waldeck asserts that this is a course of action which, is open to Hamlet because he cannot, with Polonius behind the curtain, see the character's face. Presuming that the figure behind the curtain is Claudius, Hamlet is able to commit his deed because he does not have to come face to face with his victim, "in this way bypassing Hamlet's inhibition."

Waldeck's interpretation of the final scene is qualified and equivocating. He reiterates his point that it has been social inhibition which has delayed the moment of vengeance. He asserts that Hamlet, "finally manages to run the king through, without avoiding his social presence." Unfortunately, Waldeck does not suggest why Hamlet is now able to conquer the inhibitions that have barred his action throughout the course of the play. Perhaps it is the knowledge of his own impending demise, this knowledge, in turn, allowing Hamlet to relinquish his social/civilized relation to Claudius, but, again unfortunately, Waldeck does not attribute Hamlet's transformation to any specific cause. Waldeck concludes that, "In Hamlet, Shakespeare has created not Weak and Melancholy Man, not Religious, Oedipal, or Marxist Man, but Civilized Man." Waldeck's argument belongs to the subjective school of interpretation on Hamlet's delay: Waldeck finds internal psychodynamics to be the motive force behind Hamlet's failure to act.

We have attempted to delineate two diverse approaches to the classic problem of Hamlet's delay, one being primarily aesthetic in character, the other psychoanalytical. Our personal preference is for the former over the latter, partially because of a bias toward form and aesthetics as the basis of art, partially because Elliott does not confuse his analysis with external materials. Yet both the "objective" and "subjective" perspectives on the problem of Hamlet's failure to act are legitimate methods of explication, per se, and both contribute to our understanding of the meaning and motive of the delay.

Bibliography


Essays: Analysis of Three Critical Works on Hamlet

I. ANALYSIS OF E.M.W. TILLYARD'S CLASSIFICATION OF HAMLET AS A PROBLEM PLAY

The initial chapter of E. M. W. Tillyard's Shakespeare's Problem Plays concerns Hamlet which is usually considered to be a tragedy rather than a problem play. Tillyard uses three vaguely defined processes inherent in tragedy to accomplish this distinction between Hamlet and the remainder of Shakespeare's tragedies. A
tragedy, according to Tillyard, is primarily concerned with suffering, and the critic is willing to allow that in this sense Hamlet conforms to the genre. He states, however, that Hamlet lacks "a complication and an enrichment common in much tragedy: that of being to some extent, even a tiny extent, responsible for his own misfortunes"; and here we must make our first objection to Tillyard's analysis, for it is evident that Hamlet is the active agent who willingly accepts the task bestowed upon him, and in the graveyard scene actively exercises his fate, as well as allowing the king time to plot a complex web which eventually ensnares him through his delay.

Secondly, a tragedy, in Tillyard's opinion, should contain sacrifice, and again the critic must admit that Hamlet conforms to this characteristic. Here it is interesting to note that Tillyard uses three nebulous features to define what he eventually distinguishes as a highly "formal" genre with "clear-cut" processes. Finally, and it is on this point that Tillyard's thesis rests, tragedy should have, in the critic's opinion, an element of renewal or evolved viewpoint on the part of the protagonist. Here Tillyard's argument appears inordinately flimsy for he defines tragedy by what he calls "the usual dramatic means" of fulfilling the function of renewal as "a change of mind in the hero," thus, disallowing unusual and exceptional means of renewal in an undoubtedly unusual and exceptional play.

Our opinion runs directly counter to that of Tillyard, particularly on this point, for Hamlet does indeed contain an element of renewal, in the person of Fortinbras. Indeed, it would be difficult to explain Fortinbras's presence in the work at all if Shakespeare had not intended to parallel the youthful hero with Hamlet. Fortinbras assumes the position of king after Hamlet's demise and represents an extension of the character beyond the grave. We cannot accept Tillyard's narrow and qualified definition of renewal in tragedy, for Shakespeare's inclusion of Fortinbras refers us to a larger pattern of renewal in the cosmos, one that transcends individual characters and the limited viewpoints of his critics.

II. CRITIQUE OF C. S. LEWIS'S "HAMLET—THE PRINCE OR THE POEM?"

In his address to the British Academy, "Hamlet: The Prince or the Poem?", C. S. Lewis distinguishes three separate critical approaches which have been applied to the question of why Hamlet delays in carrying out his plan to murder the regent. The first of these approaches as identified by Lewis finds Hamlet's failure to act as a basic flaw in the work, explaining the failure to act as primarily an artificial extension of the play. Lewis rejects this collective opinion by appealing to the value which Hamlet has had for the majority of its audience. The second approach, with which Lewis also finds fault, considers Hamlet's delay to be based on pragmatic grounds, reasons of state and decorum. Lewis's rejection of this viewpoint is based on the fact that Hamlet "pronounces himself a procrastinator . . . even a coward and the ghost in part agrees with him," a point to which we shall return later. A third school, in Lewis's opinion, finds the delay to be rooted in the character's psychological make-up and gives Lewis the opportunity to insist upon the over-emphasis which critics have put upon character delineation in explicating Shakespeare's work, to which he counters with an appeal for an interpretation of the play as a poetic medium rather than simply a dramatic conflict.

Lewis, having distinguished his own emphasis on the poetic aspects of Hamlet from that of a dramatic emphasis, then asserts that the work is not about "a man who has to avenge his father," but instead about "a man who has been given a task by a ghost," and it is at this point that we must take exception to Lewis's view. In attempting to downplay the Freudian aspects of Hamlet, Lewis has gone too far, for undoubtedly Hamlet has some special relation to the ghost, otherwise any of the night-watch would have suited the purposes of Ur-Hamlet. It is Hamlet, however, that identifies the apparition as his own father for our benefit. It is Hamlet who exclaims, "I'll call thee Hamlet/King, Father, royal Dane," and, certainly, the rest of what follows must be considered a revenge movement with deep-seated psychological implications and a high degree of complex tension.
A further exception we must take to Lewis's address concerns the critic's failure to apply a consistent methodology. As we have said, Lewis bases his rejection of the pragmatic explanation of Hamlet's delay on words taken directly from the character's mouth and presumably, at least in Lewis's usage, referring exclusively to himself. However, later in the address Lewis cites a passage in which Hamlet professes to be describing his own character, "I am indifferent honest . . ." and explains that Hamlet means the passage, in fact, as a universal description of mankind's condition. There seems, in our view, to be two separate standards of evidence, two contradictory approaches to the evaluation which the critic makes on the applicability of Hamlet's self-description. We find then that while we sympathize with Lewis's attempt to balance the poetic and dramatic aspects of Hamlet by placing his interpretive emphasis on "that darkness which enwraps Hamlet and the whole tragedy," rather than "the mystery in Hamlet's motives," we cannot accept his wholesale rejection of the latter or the inconsistency of his method.

III. ANALYSIS OF JOHN DOVER WILSON'S EXPLICATION OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN HAMLET AND OPHelia FROM WHAT HAPPENS IN HAMLET

In the chapter "The Attitude of Hamlet toward Ophelia" from What Happens in Hamlet, John Dover Wilson attempts to explain the profanities which Hamlet heaps upon the naïve Ophelia with whom he was previously in love. Wilson bases his analysis rather precariously on a reinterpretation of the play's stage instructions, noting that a change in Hamlet's professions toward Ophelia occurs directly after the discussion between Polonius and the king in regard to a ploy for finding what the prince is about. Directly following Polonius's avowal that he will "loose his daughter" upon Hamlet, the prince in his cryptic manner begins to infer Polonius as a panderer and a pimp, a "fishmonger" and Ophelia as a prostitute who should get herself to a nunnery. Wilson's explanation is that "Hamlet must have heard what Polonius said to the King," and attributes the lack of specific stage directions to indicate his overhearing to an oversight in transcription.

Even Wilson himself must admit that Hamlet's changed attitude was prepared by Ophelia's rejection of his prior overtures, as well as the prince's general distrust of women based upon Gertrude as a model. However, he gives these slowly evolving elements a secondary or preparatory role in the transformation of Hamlet's attitude toward Ophelia, while his awareness of Ophelia's usage by her father as the primary factor in motivating his "inexcusable treatment" of the girl. Certainly resting one's entire argument on a supposed oversight is a risky business; and, in our opinion, we cannot base Hamlet's transformation into Ophelia's taunter on this single hinge or even see it as a primary factor. Hamlet must have been aware that Ophelia's rejection of his notes was based upon duty to her father's instructions. Certainly his pronouncement earlier in the play that frailty's name is woman implies his overall evolvement of a misogynist viewpoint, for the seeds of Hamlet's "disgraceful" behavior toward the maid permeate the entire work and cannot be attributed to a single and supposed incident.

In this regard we would like to advance an alternative thesis as to Hamlet's changed attitude. Hamlet is basically a decent enough fellow, a loyal companion to Horatio, a dutiful son, in fact, he is more of a school boy than an avenger, all of which leaves him particularly unsuited to the task of murder. In order to prepare himself for the role, he must first reject all his past associations, a painful process which includes the characterization of Ophelia as unworthy. One cannot simultaneously play the role of the revenger and the lover, and in his verbal insults toward Ophelia, Hamlet is opting for the former over the latter.

**Essays: Hamlet: History, Religion, and Myth**

In this essay we will discuss the historical, mythical, and religious content of Shakespeare's Hamlet, and briefly its relationship to the political and social setting of its time and its influence on Western literature. Although it is difficult to separate these into clearly distinguishable and exclusive categories, and perhaps even misleading to do so, we will, for the sake of clearer organization and understanding present them
individually. It will be seen that they will overlap and mingle with one another, and hopefully thereby they will in the end be an integrated whole.

The origins of Shakespeare's Hamlet exist both in literature and in human life, in man's psyche, in his myth, his religion, his wishes, dreams, fantasies, and fears. And Hamlet, the character and the play reflect all of these elements. Some critics see these elements of the play as being unified, as fitting into patterns of human behavior which can be explained by theories of psychology or theology, others see these same elements fitting into nothing more than the history and scope of man's experience, explainable by little beyond their own existence, and others see confusion and irremediable conflicts.

The story from which the material for Shakespeare's play comes is an old Icelandic legend recorded by Saxo Grammiticus, a Danish author of the late 12th and early 13th centuries in his Historica Danica. In this tale Hamlet is called Amlethus. It was translated into French in a volume entitled Histoires Tragiques in 1570, and into English in 1608. Between these translations and Shakespeare's play however there were at least two other productions of the Hamlet story, and probably more.

Robert Bussel Benedict in The Mystery of Hamlet refers to "... a German play on the same subject, which translated is entitled 'Fratricide Punished; or, Prince Hamlet of Denmmark.'" Benedict also says that

*The German Hamlet*, as we know it, is a translation of an old play, preserved in German manuscript bearing the date October 27, 1710, and which is probably a copy, or an adaptation, from a much older manuscript. There is fairly good evidence that this version of Hamlet is a rough and vulgarized adaptation of an English play on the same subject, written some years before the appearance of the Shakespearean *Hamlet.*

There is evidence that prior to Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, but around the same time, there was a Hamlet play written by Thomas Kyd. B.B. Harrison points out that in 1589 Thomas Nashe published in a preface to a novel by Robert Greene a reference to "shifting companions that run through every art and thrive by none" who, if you ask them will "afford you whole Hamlets, I should say handfuls of tragical speeches." Harrison feels that this passage refers to Thomas Kyd, and if it does "it seems likely that Kyd had followed up the success of The Spanish Tragedy with another story of revenge telling how the young Prince Hamlet took vengeance for his murdered father."

The source of these plays of course is from the Historica Danica of Saxo. But there is yet an earlier reference to Hamlet than Saxo. In 1230 Snorri Sturlason compiled a collection of poetry known as The Prose Edda in which he quotes an ancient Icelandic poem by Snaebjorn:

"'Tis Said," sang Snaebjorn, "that far out, off the yonder ness, the Nine Maids of the Island Mill stir amain the host-cruel skerry—quern—they who in ages past ground Hamlet's meal. The good Chieftain furrows the hull's lair with his ship's beaked prow."

What "Hamlet's meal" refers to is a question which will be dealt with somewhat in the discussion of myth in *Hamlet*, but suffice it to say for now that this passage points both to an ancient origin of the Hamlet story in Iceland, and perhaps to an understanding of what the human and universal bases of that myth may be.

Beyond this, historically, Israel Collanez has suggested that whatever Northern elements may be detected in Saxo's Hamlet story, there can be no doubt that some important incidents have been borrowed from legendary Roman history. The merest outline of the plot cannot fail to show the striking likeness between the tales of Hamlet and Lucius Junius Brutus.
Giorgio de Santillana disagrees with this conclusion however, and sees it only as an attempt by conventional-minded philologists to ground the myth in a classical source, and sees the passage quoted above from Snaebjorn pointing to sources in "early Norse myth—or at least run through it from a still more ancient lineage." 9

There are many versions of what is going on in Hamlet, and, as I.J. Semper points out it "has been said that every generation reads its own meaning into Hamlet." 10 It may also be true that every mind reads its own meaning into Hamlet, and that these different readings, if not harmonious, are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Insofar as myth is the product of man's imagination, man's psyche, we will include psychology in this section on myth.

It would probably be acceptable to most critics to say that the origin of Hamlet is in the internal drama of man's mind as it confronts and lives in the world.

Take the origin of music. Orpheus and his harrowing death may be a poetic creation born in more than one instance in diverse places. But when characters who do not play the lyre but blow pipes get themselves flayed alive for various absurd reasons, and their identical end is rehearsed on several continents, then we feel we have got hold of something, for such stores cannot be linked by internal sequence. And when the Pied Piper turns up both in the medieval German myth of Hamelin and in Mexico long before Columbus, and is linked in both places with certain attributes like the color red, it can hardly be a coincidence. Generally, there is little that finds its way into music by chance.11

Early in his book Hamlet and Oedipus Ernest Jones states a similar premise to de Santillana's, with modifications which lead him in an entirely different direction. He sees Hamlet as suffering from conflict, and says that "experience has shown that no motive exists besides the need to be relieved of suffering that will bring a human being to reveal the truly intimate core of his personality." 12 And further, "the neurotic symptoms that had given rise to the suffering proceed from primordial difficulties and conflicts inherent in every mind, and that they are merely one of the various ways in which attempts are made to cope with these. . . ." 13 Thus does he view Hamlet.

Jones begins his analysis and understanding of Hamlet with the notion of the "problem" in the play. The "problem" of course, is why Hamlet delayed in killing Claudius, why he was so hesitant, a hesitancy which in the end led to immense catastrophe. Discarding the views of Hamlet as a melancholy person, or on indecisive person, Jones agrees with Hartley Coleridge who pointed out in his book On The Character of Hamlet that

there is every reason to believe that, apart from the task in question, Hamlet is a man capable of very decisive action, with no compunction whatever about killing. This could be not only impulsive, as in the killing of Polonius, but deliberate, as in the arranging for the death of Guildenstern and Rosencrantz. His biting scorn and mockery toward his enemies, and even towards Ophelia, his cutting denunciation of his mother, his lack of remorse after the death of Polonius; these are not signs of a gentle, yielding, or weak nature. His mind was as rapidly made up about the organization of the drama to be acted before his uncle, as it was resolutely made up when the unpleasant task had to be performed of breaking up with the no longer congenial Ophelia. He shows no trace of hesitation when he stabs the listener behind the curtain, when he makes his violent onslaught on the pirates, leaps into the grave with Laertes or accepts his challenge to what he must know was a duel, or when he follows his father’s spirit on to the battlements. . . . 14

There are arguments against this view, and we do not think that it can by any means be accepted outright. This killing is of a king—no ordinary task, and by the time the murder of Polonius takes place Hamlet has traveled
a great distance in terms of his mental and emotional state from the time the ghost first spoke to him on the battlements. Blood was already in the air. Jones points out other critics who disagree with him, notably Klein and Werder whose arguments he summarizes as follows:

The nature of Claudius' crime was so frightful and so unnatural as to render it incredible unless supported by a very considerable body of evidence. If Hamlet had simply slain his uncle, and then proclaimed, without a shred of supporting evidence, that he had done it to avenge a fratricide, the nation would infallibly have cried out upon him, not only for murdering his uncle to seize the throne himself, but also for selfishly seeding to cast an infamous slur on the memory of a man who could no longer defend his honour. In other words, it was the difficulty not so much of the act itself that deterred Hamlet as of the situation that would necessarily result from the act.¹⁵

Also, as Harrison notes,

the word of a ghost seen alone at midnight is hardly good enough evidence to kill anyone. Moreover, according to contemporary theological notions, a Christian knew that the appearance of a spirit or wraith in the shade of a person newly dead might be evil.¹⁶

So the ghost may not be Hamlet's father at all, but the devil, urging Hamlet on to some evil task. Hamlet says, when he first sees the ghost, "Be thou a spirit of health or goblin damned,/ Bring with thee airs from Heaven or blasts from Hell/ Be thy intents wicked or charitable."¹⁷

This question of Hamlet's character is one which has been long debated and mulled over, with pressing arguments on many sides. It is not a question, however, which is central to this essay, and so we will not follow it further. It was necessary to raise insofar as it is a pivotal issue in a discussion of the psychoanalysis of Hamlet. Jones accepts the view that Hamlet was otherwise "staunch of character and will, capable of committing whatever acts he felt necessary." And this is the beginning and the basis of his argument that Hamlet hesitated in killing Claudius, and hesitated in this only because it was an Oedipal murder:

In other words, whenever a person cannot bring himself to do something that every conscious consideration tells him he should do—and which he may have the strongest conscious desire to do—it is always because there is some hidden reason why a part of him doesn’t want to do it; this reason he will not own to himself and is only dimly if at all aware of. That is exactly the case with Hamlet.¹⁸

Jones traces the history of the Hamlet legend back to the ancient Iranian legend of Kaikhosrov, and finds "striking cousins"¹⁹ to this legend in the Cirakarin in the Mahabharata, the Greek Bellerophan legend, and the Finnish legend of Kullero.²⁰ The common elements of these myths are that the "hero had the task of avenging his father, who had been murdered by the latter’s brother,"²¹ and "the success of a young hero displacing a rival father."²²

For reasons of repression, says Jones, either repression of the idea of patricide altogether, or in order to split the father into two, one good and one evil so that the evil one may be murdered, the character of the father in these myths, and in particular in Hamlet, is given to two different roles. In Hamlet these are the Ghost and Claudius. In this variant the "'tyrant' who commits the murder is a substitute for the son who repudiates the idea."²³ Hence we have Claudius killing the old Hamlet instead of the young Hamlet who could not directly kill his father, then the young Hamlet killing Claudius who represents Hamlet’s father.

Jones goes on to include almost every other character in the play in the acting out of a part or variant of the Oedipal myth. Polonius represents the antipathetic characteristics of both the father and the grandfather of
mythology, so we are not surprised to find that, just as Perseus "accidentally" slew his grandfather Acrisios, who had locked up his daughter Danae so as to preserve her virginity, so does Hamlet "accidentally" slay Polonius, by a deed that resolves the situation as correctly from the dramatic as from the mythological point of view.  

The sister, says Jones, is the first woman to replace the mother in the constant unfolding of the Oedipus complex. Ophelia represents that position in Hamlet. And because Laertes' attitude toward Ophelia is almost identical to Polonius', he, Laertes, represents to Hamlet another figure of the "tyrant father" whom Hamlet slays. In that slaying Hamlet is to Laertes as, in the order of the old king, Claudius is to Hamlet. For to Laertes Polonius was not the "tyrant father" but the "good father." So, to complete the mythological cycle Laertes kills Hamlet.

Another element of the Oedipal drama is Hamlet's relationship to Ophelia. Jones notes that in the early Icelandic saga Ophelia "was said to be a foster-sister of Amleth; in the still earlier Norse source which served Saxo, the Skaane, she is actually the hero's sister." Jones draws the conclusion then that we have to see Ophelia, in terms of the mythology of the play, as Hamlet's sister. This being so we can now "trace a still deeper reason for Hamlet's misogynous turning from her and for his jealous resentment of Laertes' passion over Ophelia."  

What Jones omits in his attempt to fit all of the relationships of the play into the Oedipal myth is the existence of other, equally common and similar psychological myths recurrent in literature. First, there is the theme of fratricide. Claudius, kneeling to pray says, "Oh, my offense is rank, it smells to Heaven./ It hath the primal curse upon 't, / A brother's murder." The primal curse Claudius mentions must, of course, refer to Cain and Able.

There is also the mythical element of matricide. Although Hamlet does not kill his mother he is clearly tempted to, out of an almost uncontrollable bitterness for the part she plays in the crime against the old king. When Polonius calls Hamlet to his mother's chambers after the performance of the play by which Hamlet is convinced of Claudius' guilt Hamlet says, "O heart, lose not thy nature, let not ever/ The soul of Nero enter this firm bosom/ Let me be cruel, not unnatural./ I will speak daggers to her, but use none."  

Neither does Jones recognize the simple and pressing need of revenge. He cannot, because it does not fit into the pattern of his theory. Revenge is unquestionably and obviously an important element, if not the central motivation of the play. Hamlet is called upon to avenge the death of his father, not for the sake of vengeance alone, for, as the old king tells Hamlet,

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I am thy father's spirit  
Doomed for a certain term to walk the night  
And for the day confined to fast in fires  
Till the foul crimes done in my days of nature  
Are burnt and purged away.
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Whatever melancholy Hamlet must have felt for the death of his father (note Claudius' statements about Ophelia after her father's death: "Oh, this is the poison of deep grief. It springs/ All from her father's death." would have been compounded tenfold by this knowledge that until that death is avenged his father is condemned to purgatory. As mentioned earlier, revenge was not an uncommon theme on the Elizabethan stage, and it was certainly the central element in the original Icelandic myth.

In quoting the poem which we earlier quoted from Gollanez by the ancient Icelandic poet recorded in the *The Prose Edda* Giorgio de Santillana adds one more line: "Here the sea is called Amlodhi's Mill." In the introduction to this book, *Hamlet's Mill*, de Santillana gives us a precise and clear explanation of the meaning
of Amlodhi's or Hamlet's Mill. Here we quote it in its entirety, for it is crucial to an understanding of what de Santillana has to say.

Amlodhi was identified, in the crude and vivid imagery of the Norse, by the ownership of a fabled mill which, in his own time, ground out peace and plenty. Later, in decaying times, it ground out salt; and now finally, having landed at the bottom of the sea, it is grinding rock and sand, creating a vast whirlpool, the Maelstrom (i.e. the grinding stream, from the verb "mala," "to grind"), which is supposed to be a way to the land of the dead. This imagery stands, as the evidence develops, for an astronomical process, the secular shifting of the sun through the signs of the zodiac which determines world–ages, each numbering thousands of years. Each age brings a World era, a Twilight of the Gods. Great structures collapse; pillars topple which supported the great fabric; floods and cataclysms herald the shaping of the new world.32

This is the most basic understanding of the myth of Hamlet, for it sees Hamlet as a figure of Fate, a figure of the world of the "cycles of change."33

Shakespeare’s Hamlet is, as all people are, a carrier of fate, and hence of time. His fate is raised to heroic/tragic proportions for the sake of a clear vision of it, and for the sake of drama, but it is essentially the fate that all mankind carries. "My fate cries out," says Hamlet before his meeting with the ghost, "And makes each pretty artery in this body/ As hardy as the Nemean lion's nerve."34 And fate is Hamlet's mill grinding out first peace and plenty, then salt and sand. It is the cycle of time moving, and caught in it, as all living things are, is Hamlet. The cycle of time, of change, is one of dissolution and re-creation, and it is Hamlet's fate to be the agent of dissolution, of turn and return; "Great structures collapse; pillars topple which supported the great fabric; floods and cataclysms herald the shaping of a new world."35

Thus it is, with this basic and indivisible myth as the central element of Hamlet, that de Santillana finds parallel myths around the world, in Finland, Iran, Greece, in the Christian Bible (especially, Samson), in India, in British Columbia, in South America, and in many other places, presumably in as many other places as there are people living who have imaginations and create myths.

It is most difficult to separate the religious and the mythical elements of Hamlet; religion is myth, myth is religion. But Shakespeare's Hamlet came from ancient Icelandic sources and assumed a Christian setting. It is this Christianity of the play which we will discuss.

Whether Hamlet is an orthodox religious believer, or a renaissance skeptic and anti-Christian is a question to which only partisans need a direct and simple answer. The partisans in the audience were most probably all assuaged in their prejudices; "if a Papist and King James and Timothy Bright had seen the play, as they all probably did, each would have gone home confirmed in his own opinion about ghosts."36

The question of the ghost, of whether he is a Protestant or a Catholic ghost, or a ghost merely of a stage device is, again not an important question to answer, but one which by its asking points out some of the religious tone of the play.

The ghost appears from Purgatory, a nether-world where he must dwell in "fast and fires"37 until the crimes against him have been avenged. I.J. Semper sees the ghost as an "anomaly of a Catholic ghost from Purgatory urging blood-vengeance as a sacred duty."38 He presents an argument which then will explain that anomaly:

Shakespeare’s Hamlet was based on a crude revenge play by Thomas Kyd, with a moral atmosphere akin to that of the original story by Saxo Grammiticus; but this is a counsel of despair, for it argues that theologically speaking, Shakespeare was a muddled thinker, who
mixed Christian and pagan elements in his play with an utter disregard for ethical fitness.  

Semper goes on to refute this argument, and to substantiate an argument that the Catholic host urged revenge in a divine sense, revenge for a crime whose hidden nature would make it impossible for law-abiding men on earth to uncover and punish. Hence it is, argues Semper, that Hamlet's task is not one of personal revenge; "But, howsoever thou pursuest this act/ Taint not thy mind" says the Ghost to Hamlet. Semper sees this as part of Hamlet's conflict, for his mind is certainly tainted with motives of personal hatred and revenge.

It is clear that Hamlet is confused as to the origin of the Ghost. "Bring with thee airs from Heaven or blasts from Hell" he asks the ghost. And some critics contend that much of Hamlet's resistance to the regicide have to do with his doubts in this regard, and that it is not until after the play scene that Hamlet is convinced. Semper argues that even after the play scene Hamlet wavers, and that he does so because his motives are still impure.

Eleanor Prosser, in her book *Hamlet and Revenge* sees the problem here compounded, and argues that Hamlet is torn between his duty to his father, and his duty to the Christian prohibition against revenge. In addition:

> The sixteenth-century controversy between Catholics and Protestants over the nature of ghosts arose out of Protestant attacks on the Catholic belief in the efficacy of good works and thus of prayers for dead. Because man is justified by faith alone, the Protestants argued, either he is in a state of grace at the moment of his death and goes immediately to Heaven, or he is damned and goes immediately to Hell.

Hence we have a Catholic ghost and a "Protestant Prince who fears that this ghost may be a devil in disguise." It has been suggested that Shakespeare was mirroring in his play the arguments of Catholics and Protestants on Purgatory and the issue of man's fate after death.

This argument seems to us to be an accurate reflection of the shaping of the play, as does the one which Semper cites and rejects that Shakespeare fused Christian and pagan themes in the play. This does not make Shakespeare a "muddled thinker" but a playwright. Were he to have written either a Catholic or a Protestant version its reception would have been less enthusiastic, and the play would have been less interesting. The religious aspect of *Hamlet* is most vividly evident not in how the characters live, but in what happens to them after death. In the play there is no resolution of a position, but a constant probing which embodies all the approaches of Catholics, Protestants, and skeptics.

In his soliloquy on suicide Hamlet egresses doubt in many directions. "To sleep—perchance to dream. Aye, there's the rub./ For in that sleep of death what dreams may come/ When we have shuffled off this mortal coil/ Must give us pause." Whither it be, Heaven, Hell, or Oblivion? It is doubt which intercedes between us and our putting ourselves out of misery:

> Thus conscience does make cowards of us all,
> And thus the native hue of resolution
> Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought,
> And enterprises of great pitch and moment
> With this regard their currents turn awry
> And lose the name of action.

Later, in the prayer scene Hamlet seems clearly to believe in a Christian Heaven and Hell. Hamlet restrains himself from killing Claudius at that point, for Claudius is in a state of grace, kneeling at prayer:
How might I do it nat, now he is praying
And now I'll do 't. And so he goes to Heaven,
And so I am revenged. That world be scanned:
A villain kills my father, and for that
I, his sole son, do this same villain send
To Heaven.47

Yet, later, after Hamlet has killed Polonius Claudius asks him where Polonius is, and Hamlet replies:

Not where he eats, but where he is eaten. A certain convocation of politic worms are e'en at
him. Your worm is your only emperor for diet. We fat all creatures else to fat us, and we fat
ourselves for maggots. Your fat king and your lean beggar is but variable service, two dishes,
but to one table. That’s the end.48

As Shakespeare fills his play with these controversies of the time so also does he model the play, in its
manners and politics, after his own time. "Hamlet is an English Prince, the court of Elsinore is modelled on
the English court, and the Danish constitution that of England under the Virgin Queen."49 Marchette Chute, in
Shakespeare of London says that Hamlet was a character "caught in the general backwash of gloom and
indecision that characterized the final years of Elizabeth's reign,"50 and that he

was born in part of the young men who had been glooming about the universities and the Inns
of Court in the fin de siecle atmosphere of the late 90's and passing remarks on the hollowness
of life, the futility of heroic action and the degrading nature of sexual intercourse.51

It is the genius of the play that it is both contemporary and universal, both human and cosmic without strain at
either. Chute quotes a line from Anthony Scoloker’s introduction to one of his books which is indicative of
Hamlet’s power as literature; Any piece of writing should, says Scoloker, "Faith, it should please all, like
Prince Hamlet."52

Endnotes

5. Ibid.
11. de Santillana, p. 7


13. Ibid.


18. Jones, p. 60.


20. Ibid.

21. Ibid.


26. Ibid.


31. de Santillana, p. 87.

32. de Santillana, p. 2.

33. de Santillana, p. 5.

34. *Hamlet*, I, iv, 81-83.

35. de Santillana, p. 2.

36. Lily B. Campbell, *Shakespeare’s Tragic Heroes*, p. 84.
Essays: Comment on Hamlet's "To Be or Not to Be" Soliloquy

Shakespeare's Hamlet is one of the most familiar works of Renaissance literature. The drama of this play concerns problems as revealed through an individual family. The problems of society at large are seen through the eyes, actions and thoughts of members of that family. A ruler is holding power, and a great deal of the action is related to questions about the nature of that power. The general theme of the play deals with a society that is, or has already gone to pieces.1

Another theme of the play is that of revenge. Hamlet must avenge his father's death. Revenge is important in Elizabethan thought. From a moral perspective, one can see that revenge has a tendency to perpetuate itself. The typical writer at that time wondered if people had a right to revenge. If they didn't, then people have no recourse to justice. There are certain instances in which revenge is justified in Elizabethan thought. Although Hamlet is not a typical revenge character, the plot in which he operates is a typical revenge-based one. Vengeance corrupts him.

One other theme that pervades this play is that of insanity. The play concerns many of the basic issues of existence. Shakespeare shows how sin corrupts, how this corruption breeds disillusionment, and how this in
turn creates a preoccupation with death. When one is constantly thinking about death, then life and lore are destroyed. One psychotherapist has this to say about Hamlet: "Madness is the means Shakespeare used to convey the disillusion and despair that pervades the characters, and leads them to rash and self-destructive acts, and to express the dissolution of their world. Madness is, moreover, essential to the structure of the play as well as to the development of its themes."2

One soliloquy that illustrates these themes and others is found in Act III, Scene I, lines 55-89. This is the rather famous "to be or not to be" passage. It is a very pessimistic scene, and expresses the tone of the whole play. Madness is indicated in the sudden change of passion within a short period of time. It is a scene of passion "at a still, white beat, fused into thought."3 This change is deliberately made in order to give the audience an insight into the madness that Hamlet is experiencing.

His obsession with revenge has corrupted him and left him incapable of enjoying life. He constantly thinks about death. The whole soliloquy deals with whether or not life is worth living. He is asking whether the outcome of life and the enduring of so much pain is really worth it. Those who live long lives actually suffer more. Men suffer under oppressors and under those who have power. There is no real justice in the world. Even in love one suffers from rejection. Therefore it might be better just to kill oneself.

Besides being an indication of Hamlet’s madness the soliloquy deals with the basic issues of existence, one of the stated themes of the play. This is, of course, the key existential dilemma. He weighs the goodness and badness of his own life and the lives of other men. He seems to conclude that it is not the love of life that keeps people from taking their own lives. Rather, it is the fear of death and what might lay beyond. As he points out, no traveler has ever returned from the land of the dead and it is a place shrouded in mystery and apprehension.

The reason that men don’t take their lives more often could also be due to their individual consciences. Perhaps man innately senses that it might be morally wrong, or a great sin to God, to kill oneself. It might be better to endure life than to suffer punishment for eternity at the hands of an angry God.

When his thought is centered in this area Hamlet is not concentrating on his father’s murder or on revenge. He probably would rather ignore it and walk away from the whole mess completely. But then he might be walking into a vacuum. He could kill his uncle and inherit the throne. But this might not bring satisfaction either.

Another reason he prefers death to life is that he has been disillusioned, which is the next step after corruption. He has been disillusioned with someone he loved ("The pangs of despised love . . ."). This person was essential to his well-being. Now he has no good reason to live except for fear of death and conscience-related reasons.

In order to go on living, and live a productive life, Hamlet has to solve the problem raised in this soliloquy. He is a grief-stricken man, caught in the middle of a great number of difficulties and dangers. The only remedy to his problem lies in the curing of his mind. Only then will he be able to rise above the many serious problems he faces. Renaissance moralists have pointed out that all men have to deal with this problem. They criticize him for allowing himself to become "lapsed in time and passion" so that he continually lets go "the important acting of a dread command."5 His mind is spoiled with the interests and cowardice of the world.

Through the problems of this individual, one can see the problems of society as a whole. He criticizes himself, not just for his own personal faults, but for those of man in general. In Hamlet, one can see how fragile he is.

Hamlet’s struggle, then, is more significant than it would appear to be at first glance. He is not asking this question just for himself, but for man in general. Human misery and misfortune provides the background over
which Hamlet must rise.

Hamlet's realization of the corruption and decadence of the world leads to this soliloquy. His depression is echoed in the lines. The disillusionment found in this passage is indicative of the mood of the entire play. It modifies Hamlet's character, highlights his indecision, his sense of vanity and disenchantment with society. Through Hamlet we can see how "the relation between thought and deed, intent and realization is confused in the same way that the norms and institutions which would regulate the life of a well-ordered court have been deprived of their original purpose and beauty." Hamlet cannot rise above the corrupt society of which he is part.

This particular soliloquy does show, however, that Hamlet is trying to do just that. His philosophizing seems to be a kind of moral compromise. He is showing himself and the world that he is above the decadence. He is not satisfied with the present, and is trying to rise above it. He does aspire to some sort of moral perfection. The struggle itself elevates him.

NOTES


4. Lidz, p. 66.


BIBLIOGRAPHY


**Critical Essays: Hamlet, Prince of Denmark**

Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, has recently lost his father; his mother has entered into an overhasty marriage with the murdered man’s brother, Claudius. Grieving at his father’s death, and morally outraged at the hurried marriage, Hamlet broods about his helplessness, until a ghost appears on the ramparts, telling him his father
was in fact murdered by his uncle, who poured poison in his ear while he slept. Gertrude, his mother, is indirectly implicated, but the ghost orders Hamlet to confine his revenge to Claudius.

In a series of delaying tactics, partly designed to obtain ocular proof and partly a result of Hamlet’s natural hesitation to kill, he forces Claudius to react in public. Feigning madness, Hamlet waits for his chance to kill his uncle in hot blood (not a sin); the play ends in a duel of poisoned swords.

The complex nature of this play, together with the soaring poetry of the soliloquies, makes it the most often quoted play in all history. Hamlet’s feigned madness, hesitation to action, demand for ocular proof, and final revenge are conventions of a formulaic dramatic form called revenge tragedy. What lifts HAMLET above its predecessors is the revelation of character by means of poetic diction. Through the device of soliloquies (internal monologues), we are privy to the anguished deliberations of a sensitive soul debating with itself the moral consequences of murder, weighed against filial loyalty, responsibilities of royal birth, and the human hesitation to perform irreversible acts whose consequences are unknown.

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**Critical Essays: Critical Evaluation**

*Hamlet, Prince of Denmark* has remained the most perplexing, as well as the most popular, of William Shakespeare’s tragedies. Whether considered as literature, philosophy, or drama, its artistic stature is universally admitted. To explain the reasons for its excellence in a few words, however, is a daunting task. Apart from the matchless artistry of its language, the play’s appeal rests in large measure on the character of
Hamlet himself. Called upon to avenge his father’s murder, he is compelled to face problems of duty, morality, and ethics that have been human concerns through the ages. The play has tantalized critics with what has become known as the Hamlet mystery, that of Hamlet’s complex behavior, most notably his indecision and his reluctance to act.

Freudian critics have located Hamlet’s motivation in the psychodynamic triad of the father-mother-son relationship. According to this view, Hamlet is disturbed and eventually deranged by his Oedipal jealousy of the uncle who has done what, Freud claimed, all sons long to do themselves. Other critics have taken the more conventional tack of identifying as Hamlet’s tragic flaw the lack of courage or moral resolution. In this view, Hamlet’s indecision is a sign of moral ambivalence that he overcomes too late.

Both of these views presuppose a precise discovery of Hamlet’s motivation. However, Renaissance drama is not generally a drama of motivation, either by psychological character or moral predetermination. Rather, the Renaissance tendency is to present characters with well-delineated moral and ethical dispositions who are faced with dilemmas. It is the outcome of these conflicts, the consequences rather than the process, that normally holds center stage. What Shakespeare presents in Hamlet, Prince of Denmark is an agonizing confrontation between the will of a good and intelligent man and the uncongenial role—that of avenger—that fate calls upon him to play.

The role of avenger is a familiar one in Renaissance drama. In the opening description of Hamlet as bereft by the death of his father and distressed by his mother’s hasty marriage, Shakespeare creates an ideal candidate to assume such a role. Hamlet’s despondency need not be Oedipal to explain the extremity of his grief. His father, whom he deeply loved and admired, is recently deceased, and he himself seems to have been robbed of his birthright. Shakespeare points to Hamlet’s shock at Gertrude’s disrespect to the memory of his father, rather than his love for his mother, as the source of his distress. Hamlet’s suspicion is reinforced by the ghostly visitation and the revelation of murder.

If Hamlet had simply proceeded to act out the avenger role assigned to him, the play would have lacked the moral and theological complexity that provides its special fascination. Hamlet has, after all, been a student of theology at Wittenberg, and his knowledge complicates the situation. His accusation of incest is not an adolescent excess but an accurate theological description of a marriage between a widow and her dead husband’s brother. Moreover, Hamlet’s theological accomplishments do more than exacerbate his feelings. For the ordinary avenger, the commission from the ghost of a murdered father would be more than enough, but Hamlet is aware of the unreliability of otherworldly apparitions and consequently reluctant to heed the ghost’s injunction to perform an action that to him seems objectively evil. In addition, the fear that his father was murdered in a state of sin and is condemned to hell not only increases Hamlet’s sense of injustice but also, paradoxically, casts further doubt on the reliability of the ghost’s exhortation, for the ghost may be an infernal spirit goading him to sin.

Hamlet’s indecision is therefore not an indication of weakness but the result of his complex understanding of the moral dilemma with which he is faced. He is unwilling to act unjustly, yet he is afraid that he is failing to exact a deserved retribution. He debates the murky issue until he becomes unsure whether his own behavior is caused by moral scruple or cowardice. His ruminations stand in sharp contrast with the cynicism of Claudius and the verbose moral platitudes of Polonius, just as the play stands in sharp contrast with the moral simplicity of the ordinary revenge tragedy. Through Hamlet’s intelligence, Shakespeare transformed a stock situation into a unique internal conflict.

Hamlet believes that he must have greater certitude of Claudius’s guilt if he is to take action. The device of the play within a play provides greater assurance that Claudius is suffering from a guilty conscience, but it simultaneously sharpens Hamlet’s anguish. Seeing a re-creation of his father’s death and Claudius’s response stiffens Hamlet’s resolve to act, but once again he hesitates when he sees Claudius in prayer. Hamlet’s
inaction in this scene is not the result of cowardice or even of a perception of moral ambiguity but rather of the very thoroughness of his commitment: Having once decided on revenge, he wants to destroy his uncle body and soul. It is ironic that Hamlet is thwarted this time by the combination of theological insight with the extreme ferocity of his vengeful intention. After he leaves Claudius in prayer, the irony of the scene is intensified, for Claudius reveals to the audience that he has not been praying successfully and was not in a state of grace after all.

That Hamlet loses his mental stability is arguable from his behavior toward Ophelia and his subsequent meanderings. Circumstance has forced upon the prince a role whose enormity has overwhelmed the fine emotional and intellectual balance of a sensitive, well-educated man. Gradually, he is shown regaining control of himself and arming himself with a cold determination to do what he has decided is the just thing. Even then, it is only in the carnage of the concluding scenes that Hamlet finally carries out his intention. Having concluded that “the readiness is all,” he strikes his uncle only after he has discovered Claudius’s final scheme to kill him.

The arrival of Fortinbras, who has been lurking in the background throughout the play, superficially seems to indicate that a new, more direct and courageous order will prevail in the place of the evil of Claudius and the weakness of Hamlet. Fortinbras’ superiority is only superficial, however. He brings stasis and stability back to a disordered kingdom but does not have the self-consciousness and moral sensitivity that destroy and redeem Hamlet.

Gerald Else has interpreted Aristotle’s notion of catharsis to be not a purging of the emotions but a purging of the moral horror, pity, and fear ordinarily associated with them. If that is so, then Hamlet, by the conflict of his ethical will with his role, has purged the avenger of his bloodthirstiness and turned the stock figure into a self-conscious hero in moral conflict.

Critical Essays: Framing Ophelia: Representation and the Pictorial Tradition

Kaara Peterson

In her far-ranging study Over Her Dead Body: Death, Femininity and the Aesthetic, Elisabeth Bronfen elucidates Western culture's fascination with depictions of dead, beautiful women in literature and the visual arts respectively, concluding that because such images are so omnipresent we are scarcely aware of their status as a resolute cultural tradition. Likening portraits of dead women to Poe's famous purloined letter—so numerous as to be invisible to the viewer's eye—Bronfen elaborates the aesthetic association between women and death, quoting Poe's notorious statement, "the death of a beautiful woman is, unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world." Bronfen's study, of course, is part of a general concern these days with the implications of "representation," and her discussion can also be situated in the larger context of current interarts debates about whether traditions in one aesthetic mode affect and should be studied in conjunction with each other, or whether such approaches end up as a kind of ecphrastic iconology, wherein the verbal invariably becomes the interpreter of the visual.

Insofar as Ophelia is arguably Shakespeare's most recognizable female character, with a long and significant history of "purloining" in both verbal and visual media, she would seem to be an excellent focus for discussions of this kind. And indeed she is, albeit ironically so, for just as Bronfen's examples of dead women tend to remain distinct—generically categorizable as literary or visual bodies, either/or—so literary analysis rarely seeks to consider the ever-present visual interpretations and popular imaginings of Ophelia's character, and equally in discussing her representations art historians regularly prefer to concentrate on aspects of formal composition rather than explore her origins within the Shakespeare text. At the same time, in the case of
Ophelia, we have an instance of a character whose portrait has been painted with such consistency that she has become something of a visual cliché, whereby the "typical" Ophelia of the plastic arts has so imprinted itself on our imaginations that we tend either to ignore how her death is reported in *Hamlet* or we tend to augment the text to include a drowning scene, which literalizes into a "seen," appearing in our mind's eye as we read.

My purpose in this essay is to bring together these previously disparate methodologies that split Ophelia's body up between disciplines. In addressing Shakespeare's character in this manner, however, I do not seek to establish an unequivocal "body" of work in which we can locate the "true" Ophelia, for my direction here will point out the reverse, that Ophelia is always elusive despite the fact that she is so "present" in artworks. She is an elusive figure because such artworks regularly take as their subject a literary fragment from *Hamlet* reporting Ophelia's death, a fragment in which it is doubly impossible for Ophelia's body to be present. The method I adopt is partially paradoxical, for I wish to unearth the "literary" body of Ophelia present in different visual representations at the same time that I want to utilize these same media to suggest the degree to which they have formed our understanding of the dramatic textual character.

In order to position Ophelia's dual representational history more precisely within both art-historical and dramatic-critical frameworks, I start by tracing the history of painted Ophelias as they first appear typically in the 18th century. My discussion of Gertrude's narrative of Ophelia's drowning next establishes the crucial context for understanding the important innovations of Arthur Hughes's 19th-century painting which I examine at length before returning to complete my catalogue of other important but more general examples of visual media from the 19th and 20th centuries; thus, I locate my literary investigation into Ophelia's origins in Shakespeare between visual arts contexts purposefully, hoping to elucidate Ophelia's extraordinary connection to both genres. In the final sections, I consider the broader implications of Ophelia's dual representational life for aspects of popular culture.

Prior to the mid-19th century, painted depictions of Shakespeare's Ophelia differ significantly from the image of the drowning, pathos-inspiring figure that typically haunts our imaginations today. When 18th-century illustrators of Shakespeare—e.g., Francis Hayman, Benjamin West, George Romney, and Nicholas Rowe—chose to depict Ophelia at all, they usually placed her in a larger, group context where her presence is not highlighted as a focal point. For example, as John Harvey has discussed with respect to two mid-18th-century plates of Hayman's *Mousetrap* scene, in these works other characters are the primary focus (5-6). West's *Ophelia* (1792) from the Boydell Shakespeare Gallery exhibition features her prominently in the mad scene, but with Laertes shown dismayed by her distributing flowers to the other characters. As William L. Pressly notes with respect to his collection of plates of paintings held by the Folger Library, "depictions of Ophelia did not become popular until the late eighteenth century" (49). The earliest exception to the presentation of Ophelia in a group context would seem to be Richard Westall's Boydell Gallery engraving (c. 1789) of an apprehensive-looking Ophelia heading with trepidation to the water's edge. Westall's engraving rapidly begins to look as though it could be the model for all future works, for as Pressly notes: "the episode most frequently chosen by artists [is] the moment just before Ophelia plunges to a watery death. Ophelia is typically shown adorned with flowers . . . loose tresses are also typical of Ophelia iconography" (50). However, rarely is she presented alone until the next century, when "character criticism" is on the rise in literary circles and when, more generally, Shakespeare reigns supreme in Romantic-era imaginations, as Jonathan Bate has noted.

It is to the mid-19th century that we must look for a substantial increase in the number of Ophelia-specific depictions: "Ophelia was the single most popular literary subject for artists, with more than fifty portrayals recorded in exhibition catalogues" (Pressly 49). Here the focus is regularly centered upon Ophelia, presented as a single subject, and usually in her drowning scene. As though we have been trained precisely by Poe to regard the death of a beautiful woman as a primarily aesthetic experience, we have come to expect seeing this scene if a painting bears the title "Ophelia." Ophelia's about-to-be-submerged or partially submerged body begins to seem clichéd, appearing most recently in the visual media in the form of director Kenneth Branagh's
Hamlet (1997) as a flashback addendum to Gertrude's report. So where are we first persuaded that we "see" her drown?

Queen: There is a willow grows askant the brook
That shows his hoary leaves in the glassy stream.
Therewith fantastic garlands did she make
Of crow-flowers, nettles, daisies, and long purples,
That liberal shepherds give a grosser name,
But our cold maids do dead men's fingers call them.
There on the pendent boughs her crownet weeds
Clamb'ring to hang, an envious sliver broke,
When down her weedy trophies and herself
fell in the weeping brook. Her clothes spread wide,
And mermaid-like awhile they bore her up,
Which time she chanted snatches of old lauds,
As one incapable of her own distress,
Or like a creature native and indued
Unto that element. But long it could not be
Till that her garments, heavy with their drink,
Pull'd the poor wretch from her melodious lay
To muddy death.

(4.7.165-82)

Gertrude's recital to the court of the events surrounding Ophelia's death is the only "evidence" we are given as the explanation for her drowning. While it is not new to observe that Gertrude cannot have been present during the drowning and thus reports what she has been told by someone else, it is significant to note that with the exception of Martha C. Ronk and Bridget Geliert Lyons, critics have neglected the import of this basic observation and glossed over the oddity of the aestheticized tone of the recital, choosing largely instead to fall in line with Harold Jenkins's opinion that Gertrude's "account of it, reaching chorus-like beyond the dialogue, the play expects us to accept" (546). I would argue, however, that rather than "expecting us to accept" the evidence, Shakespeare highlights its aestheticized quality. This passage is similar to the treatment of Lavinia in Titus Andronicus, where Shakespeare has Marcus use incongruous Petrarchan love poetry when he paradoxically and grotesquely praises her mutilated body.

Clearly, Shakespeare is not afraid to show his audience the on-stage spectacle of feminine death or suffering, as is amply illustrated by Cleopatra, Juliet, Desdemona, and by Gertrude herself. Thus, as Lyons has noted, "to accept" Gertrude's speech as if its discomfiting quality were merely accidental (deserving to be swept under the carpet) is to ignore an important issue in the characterization of Ophelia. Throughout the play, Ophelia has her opinions and statements recast for her by other characters—namely, Laertes, Hamlet, and Polonius—who wish her to behave in a manner they deem appropriate. To mention just one example, upon hearing from Ophelia that Hamlet has been courting her, Polonius recasts Ophelia's view of the relationship as one in which Hamlet ruthlessly exploits her naïveté so that he may conquer her sexually. Gertrude's speech is the epitome of such reconfigurings of Ophelia's realities, and it also should make us think twice about why her death need be so prettily recorded, and recorded unmistakably as an accident.

It is worthwhile to point out that the controversy within and without the play over whether Ophelia commits suicide or is drowned accidentally depends largely upon the discrepancy between what Gertrude says in this speech and the discussion that the gravediggers have in the subsequent scene. Although as Michael MacDonald has explained, Renaissance law was confusing and rather arbitrary about what determined whether one was "guilty of one's own murder," felo de se, or innocent by reason of insanity, the conversation
of the gravediggers seems to indicate that Ophelia has committed suicide but is nevertheless being given some of the proper rites of a customary burial because she is of high social standing. Perhaps Gertrude is socially motivated to "portray"—hence the aesthetic inventory—Ophelia's suspicious death as an innocuous fall. Perhaps not.

While I will not solve the mystery of Gertrude's incongruous recital in the space of this essay, the incongruity is the relevant issue writ large. Unless we want to accuse him of extreme carelessness, Shakespeare intends to leave the circumstances of Ophelia's death—suicide or accident—inconclusive: he gives Gertrude this less than typical messenger performance (her only extended monologue in the play) and then provides for its immediate discrediting by the gravediggers. Whether we "side" with Gertrude's casting of the event as an accident attended by silvery, envious willows, whether we find surer ground with the gravediggers' opinion that she is a suicide being improperly well-buried, or whether we gloss over the speech's oddness and the identity of the particular agent of its delivery—all are equally to miss the very point: there is an epistemological gap in the text that cannot be filled in. We cannot explain away the difference between Gertrude's and the gravediggers' perception of what has happened to Ophelia's body. In fact, how conclusively does Shakespeare offer us the corpus delicti so to speak?

We are presented with a visually emblematic description of the event to which Gertrude was not a witness, which serves to make her an "unreliable narrator": precisely because she is not a choric figure (only chorus-like, for some) here or elsewhere in the play, her remove from the progress of events and distance from a position of omniscience leaves her narrative without "authority," literally and metaphorically. Far from being the "authority"—the source of the information told from the perspective of a knowledgeable witness—she retells what someone else has told her about what has transpired, and she repeats it in self-conscious, mannered literary reportage. Her poetic figures, moreover, appear to borrow, at least partially, from Ovid's tale describing Arethusa's being changed into a river.

The Poplar, and the hoary Willow, fed
By bordring streames, their gratefull shadow spred.
In this coole Rivulet my foot I dipt;
Then knee-deepe wade: nor so content, unstript
My self forth-with; upon a [willow] stud
My robe I hung, and leapt into the flood.
Where-ere I step, streames run; my haire now fell
In trickling deaw; and, sooner then I tell
My destinie, into a Flood I grew.

(5.592-640)

Just as Shakespeare took Ovid's Philomela as the source for Lavinia's tragedy, so here the echoic quality of the vocabulary and situation suggests that again a tale by Ovid supplies Shakespeare with the source material for Gertrude's ventriloquization of Ophelia's story; the tale of Ophelia's drowning becomes a mannered, stylized, lyrical recital. According to J. Philip Brockbank's witty view: "the queen was too preoccupied with composing the felicitous verses she hoped to speak in court to spare time to take a grip on Ophelia's weedy trophies and haul her out" (111). But Gertrude, of course, was not present at the scene of drowning; thus, the poetic verse is occasioned rather by Gertrude's desire to perform for her audience. The oracular skill suggested by the "felicitous verse" has been mentioned by many critics—although it is only Jenkins's reference to her tone as "chorus like" that begins to sense the awkwardness and artificiality of Gertrude's new position as the historian of a tragedy to which she was not a witness.

Not being a witness to the drowning, Gertrude cannot be an "authority" about the event she relates. With respect to the question of how much she is an "author"—in the sense that she must make alterations to the
unidentified messenger's "source material" in the process of refashioning it (much as Shakespeare refashions Ovid in penning the monologue)—this is of course indeterminable: we are unaware of what was told to her "before" (as if there were a before that exists beyond the play structure) she tells it in the fashion that she does. Nevertheless, the very impossibility of attributing any definable elements of authorship to Gertrude serves to make the point about the story's lacking authority.

Nor is Gertrude an "authority" in the very literal etymological sense of "originator" for the story she tells: the original report is authored by someone else whose identity is not known, a ghost author, a transparent originator in perhaps an endless series of deferred authorities. Indeed, careful examination of Gertrude's tale reveals the ghostly status or missing referent of the originating author/source, and it also reveals the missing authority for and of this history of Ophelia's body. After the report of the drowning, we have Ophelia's body directly in the funeral scene, but is the real history of the body—the story of the events that cause her death—identical to the body in Gertrude's story-telling of history? do we have the accurate account of a material body's history or a materializing history that has no body/nobody as the final, unequivocal referent? I think the point here is that there is no way to determine difference if it were to exist: the story once Gertrude "produces" her monologue—the French histoire (meaning both story and history) is a favorite of feminists for a reason. Ophelia's body, then, captured picturesquely, does not lack "reference" (or mention) by Gertrude, but as I have argued above, her body is still only the certain referent of a tale whose authority in all its senses must be understood to be lacking.

Interestingly, Gertrude's monologue is about witnessing the loss of a life to death, of a body that cannot be recouped from nature's grasp, much like Hamlet's ghostly father cannot recoup himself until he burns off his "purgatorial fires." But Gertrude's last chapter in the history of Ophelia also mimics or repeats the very circumstances that it purports to address; that is, her narrative describing the progressive loss of Ophelia's body also enacts that loss in the process of its telling, for the "unauthorized," finely-wrought tale that she tells always stands in for the missing original narrative, which is always a lost "body of work." Thus, Ophelia's body is lost once to death and once more to the very narrative about her death: this repetition suffers elision if the set-off speech is viewed merely as an uncomplicated extension of a "choric voice." We miss the implications of the artificiality and remove of its content and speaker.

In fact, to argue that Shakespeare intends us to gloss over Gertrude's performance is performative of the repetition of loss that I have described above, for if we pay no attention to the discomfort we feel for her language's artificial rhetoricty—what makes critics resort to calling her voice "chorus-like"—and gloss over it, we actually reduplicate Ophelia's textual elision, the textual death in narrative. I suggest that we have become anaesthetized to the oddnesses attending the speech only because it has been augmented by a substantial catalogue of representations of a primarily visual nature: we have been trained to "read" this speech as a visual experience and fail to notice that Shakespeare leaves the event as reportage. For us, Ophelia's drowning scene has become a "seen" playing through our collective memory.

Gertrude "frames" Ophelia's story by making it as "pretty as a picture," and as such Gerturde's story becomes in turn the visual "history" of the body of Ophelia, more often than not, as is evidenced by the artistic repetitions of this particular scene. The variety of images produced reenacting the scene of Ophelia's drowning presents us, importantly, with the implicit statement that Gertrude's powerful rhetorical figures are not simply the tail-end to "Ophelia's story" in Hamlet, but that this one aspect of her life (death) has become essentially her entire story through a kind of synecdochic process—the part represents the whole. A ventriloquized history becomes overwhelmingly the "story of Ophelia." This perhaps complicated movement finds a simple model if one notes that a whole series of paintings entitled "Ophelia" are all essentially thematic variations of La Mort d'Ophélie (Eugène Delacroix), because in portraying her death each implies that the story of "Ophelia" generally is that of her death. On the basis of such a large number of these paintings, one might think that she does nothing else in the play but fall into a brook and drown. Certainly, the main feature of Gertrude's monologue is also the desire to narrate Ophelia's progress to death: to borrow Peter
Brooks's term, the "narrative desire" is to arrive finally at the beautiful, dying body of Ophelia, which is then reenacted and repeated by visual artists who perceive Ophelia as "a creature native and indue / Unto that element," as Gertrude describes it.

From the generations of paintings portraying Ophelia's death scene as narrated by Gertrude, Arthur Hughes's 1852 *Ophelia* . . . provides the most exemplary model. Hughes's canvas is a lunette shape with a remarkable frame: on it is reproduced, in excerpted form, the first half of Gertrude's lines from the text of *Hamlet*. Many reproductions of the painting (and engravings) do not feature the frame, and many critics do not mention this important detail. In Elaine Showalter's discussion, Hughes's *Ophelia* is primarily a representative of the iconography of madness: "In the Royal Academy show of 1852, Arthur Hughes's entry shows a tiny waif-like creature—a sort of Tinker Bell Ophelia—in a filmy white gown, perched on a tree trunk by the stream. The overall effect is softened, sexless, and hazy, although the straw in her hair resembles a crown of thorns. Hughes juxtaposes childlike femininity and Christian martyrdom" (63). This painting, however, is less a painting of the "mad Ophelia" than it is another always-inscribed-in-the-death-moment Ophelia, her most repetitively invoked profile. As much as we might wish to see the Hughes canvas as a representation of feminine insanity, the painting's use of the textual excerpt asserts instead that the subject being depicted is Ophelia about to drown: we are looking at a moment just prior to her drowning and death, which is directed by the (con)text of the writing on the frame—it does not feature, for example, the earlier scene where she is actually present on stage in a state of madness.

Interestingly, Hughes's framing of Ophelia in this manner must also be understood to be a repetition of Gertrude's narrative framing of the story of Ophelia's drowning, for while the painting's framed/framing text refers to the visual subject it surrounds, this painted Ophelia can only rearticulate or repeat—but not refer back to—the text. In other words, the painting places Ophelia firmly in the context of Gertrude's story by literalizing what is already a "speaking picture" into a real picture. The painting articulates the progress of Ophelia's body to "muddy death" by repeating Gertrude's utterances: the word made painted flesh, so to speak, is truly re-presentational. Of course, it is possible that Hughes's painting and other like representations of Ophelia could be seeking to interrogate Gertrude's representation by making the odd pictorial quality of her speech a demonstrable, problematic reality, but as Elisabeth Bronfen's arguments suggest, the habit of art's preferring to portray dead beautiful women throughout history as aesthetic objects would seem to foreclose upon such an analytic response to the speech.

The way that the Hughes painting implicates the verbal text provides a particularly economical illustration of the way that painters replicate the framing strategy of Gertrude's speech, but all paintings of Ophelia depicting an earlier or later moment in her progress to death already depict death, even if it is death-about-to-happen. Just as death has also already determined the teleology of Gertrude's story—the narrative end of which also desires precisely to portray an "end" aesthetically—so these canvases simply repeat one fraction of a continuous movement towards the end of the narrative. These paintings all feature the site of her death; i.e., watery landscapes and flora with or without other plant life, however abstract the representation.

Earlier contributions to the flood of images to which Hughes's 1852 *Ophelia* belongs include Richard Redgrave's *Ophelia Weaving Her Garlands*, (1842). Redgrave's sober, neoclassically-composed Ophelia sits on a bowing tree bough just above the flower-dotted water's edge; the scene's composition with the centrally-situated static woman is typical of formal portraiture of the era, as if Ophelia with her vaguely distracted features and corseted, heavy dress were sitting in a drawing room rather than about to experience a violent end.

This aspect is indeed captured in the pre-Hughes contributions of Delacroix, whose 1843 lithographs and the 1844 painting of *La Mort d'Ophélie* . . . strike the viewer with a scene of immediate peril: Ophelia's heavy body is about to fall into turbulent waters—a "brook" which looks more threatening than any of the rest of the
watery depictions of Ophelia one encounters. The combination of the threateningly active river below and the suspended, about-to-fall Ophelia present her at a moment of imminent death; it is death in progress, in fact, moving along resolutely as she begins to lose her grip. In fact, Ophelia's death is a work in progress in a fuller sense, for Delacroix was apparently as fascinated with repainting and reliming the figure of Ophelia as he was with painting Hamlet. Similarly, as Leonard Roberts and Mary Virginia Evans have discussed, Arthur Hughes himself reworked several perspectives of the same scene.

By reason of a strange albeit pre-Raphaelite coincidence, in the same Royal Academy exhibition in which the Hughes Ophelia appeared, there was also featured Millais's 1852 Ophelia . . . , which soon became the most famously reproduced work illustrating Shakespeare's character. In this work, Elaine Showalter sees an interesting tension between the formalist detail and eroticism: "While Millais's Ophelia is sensuous siren as well as victim, the artist rather than the subject dominates the scene. The division of space between Ophelia and the natural details Millais had so painstakingly pursued reduces her to one more visual object; and the painting has such a hard surface, strangely flattened perspective, and brilliant light that it seems cruelly indifferent to the woman's death" (63). Death is indeed the central event being anticipated in the Millais painting, and Showalter's comments cannily zero in on the manner in which Ophelia's body is "reduced" and "flattened" into a "visual object" for purely aesthetic contemplation, for this making of a body into a work of art is analogous to Gertrude's original narration of the drowning, the "portrait" that threatens to reduce Ophelia's death to the status of only a verbal object.

The late 19th century saw moribund Ophelias multiplying in the art world, of which the anonymous "T. E. Monogrammist" Ophelia . . . in the Folger Shakespeare Library collection is in many ways representative. Mention should also be made of Henry Nelson O'Neil's Ophelia of 1874, followed shortly after by John William Waterhouse's 1889 Ophelia, one of several depictions of the same scene he repainted at least once in 1910. In all the aforementioned paintings, we have a case of the artist "following convention" (Pressly 50) by placing a crown of flowers in her loose hair and showing her in a white dress as she walks to the water's edge; the iconography or conventions of dress and landscape for depicting Ophelia's incipient death are firmly in place by this juncture.

At the beginning of the 20th century, the tradition continues with Odilon Rédon's 1908 Ophélia, which portrays in a more abstract manner an unidentifiable point in the drowning. For if the bright polychrome of the wash of flowers dominating the tableau does not make Ophelia look like she is being "drowned out" by them, an abstract body of water in an equally abstract landscape is still present in the upper righthand region of the canvas: just as the Hamlet text on the frame defines what is about to happen at the edge of the brook in Hughes's painting, so Ophelia's watery context is always eerily proleptic for her death—is always referring to her imminent death. In Rédon's painting, Ophelia's face is tilted upwards, a garland of flowers is interwoven in her hair; and her eyes appear peacefully closed. Oddly, the painting is a twin of Rédon's depiction of Orpheus, another character with a long mythological history telling of his body's end in a watery grave.

Joseph Stella's Ophelia (c. 1926), while sharply limiting the viewer's perspective with a tight close-up of her face, nevertheless positions two waterlilies at the upper right and left-hand sides to convey the watery, floral context with remarkable economy. . . . Similarly, although Stanley William Hayter conceived of his 1936 Ophelia as a thorough abstraction—the plane of tangled, curvilinear geometric shapes is not representational—Hayter also confirms the existence of the traditional components of the Ophelian landscape: "Ophelia represents lines of flow in water, intense light, floating flower, insect, fragments of human form—held as with surface tensions of liquid" (Janis 121). Hayter's abstract "fragments of human form" connote a relatively anonymous body, but an Ophelian body nonetheless because of its placement in the floral, watery context of her death scene. In view of this dominant symbology, and although in some of these paintings there may indeed be some iconographical references to insanity of the type Showalter seeks, any "psychiatric" detail is ultimately secondary to the focus on death. The watery grave is a consistent feature of Ophelia's landscape, so much so that it is part and parcel of the standard Ophelian iconography.
At last count, Stephano Cusumano's quasi-cubist 1970 Ophelia is the most recent entry in a still-growing catalogue. This perspective painting takes the progress toward death even one step closer than the Millais: featuring a mannequin-like figure with blocky, nearly androgynous facial planes, Cusumano depicts a body sinking below the water's surface, surrounded by air bubbles, obscured by and wrapped in weeds. Thus, despite the remarkable range of styles of Ophelia paintings reflected by the various schools and movements here—one might compare Millais to Cusumano for the similar placement of the body even if the manner of composition is vastly different—a discernible vocabulary of presentation articulates itself in all such works.

To put the painters themselves back into this text-painting relationship, one might describe them as being narrators of the (same) story and as continuing the process of elision that Ophelia has already undergone in the narrative. Reproducing Gertrude's speech, a painter reproduces it differently, in a different medium: artists make concrete an anatomical body that had no physicality in speech by "rearticulating" it, and this process is in itself a form of repetition, since Ophelia's painted body mimics the story of Ophelia's narrative body, altering in medium but not in content—there is no new tale to tell. That is, the painted body depicts its compliance with the textual, narrative body by presenting the same body in a different medium, progressing to death housed within new anatomical trappings. Yet the stability of the "real" body of Ophelia that we see in paintings is illusory precisely because the origin of the painted body always lies within the narrative body, and the narrative body's description by Gertrude, we must remember, has no "authority," no referent, no originator, pointing instead back to the epistemological gap in the text. This gap is also increasingly elided as we become used to seeing Ophelia depicted in this particular manner, so that painted Ophelias have come to influence our perceptions of the literary Ophelia as much as the literary has inaugurated painted Ophelias. In view of the great number of artists who paint this scene over and over again—with some like Hughes (see Roberts & Evans), Delacroix, and Waterhouse painting different approaches to Ophelia repetitively themselves—it would appear that the fascination lies in the extent to which Ophelia's image is already commonly a painterly subject but also because the scene remains unfamiliar, insofar as it stages the extra-dramatic moment of Hamlet, the moment where the text breaks down.

Not accidentally, the "hole" or non-signifying place in the text of Hamlet is also the feminine body's locus. As elaborated by Elisabeth Bronfen, the portrait of a dead woman reflects the instability of the feminine body and its symbolic connection to death more generally. Bronfen establishes her argument within Lacanian frameworks, locating the feminine body as both a sign of death and of the constant deferral of death; she theorizes that the dead feminine body is always being represented, apotropaically, as an intact, beautiful body: "The beauty of Woman and the beauty of the image both give the illusion of intactness and unity, cover the insupportable signs of lack, deficiency, transiency and promise their spectators the impossible—an obliteration of death's unique castrative threat to the subject" (64). According to this psychoanalytic model, in their being associated with "lacking" a phallus (and thus the ability to control "signification" or meaning), women are also uniquely connected to death, for death's awesome and threatening power is that it evacuates all meaning. Thus the struggle to make meaning, to make things signify, is always a battle against lack, or "nonmeaning," or death. In this sense, the potential breakdown of signification that is threatened by a dead body gendered female becomes doubly threatening to the masculine subject, and this is why the death of a woman must therefore be constructed as the death of a beautiful woman—i.e., in order to foreclose upon the reality of death's leveling power, in order to reject the power of death to destroy a masculine identity that is grounded upon possession of the phallus. The dead and beautiful woman for Bronfen, therefore, indicates an excess of meaning—the dead feminine body is always being invested with a plethora of signification so as to ward off its radical instability, its potential to dissolve into nonmeaning and in turn, to divest the masculine subject of his identity.

To return to Ophelia and to Hamlet, since we cannot literally see Ophelia's body because it is only a figure evoked in Gertrude's speech in Shakespeare's text, we are left in turn with a body that does not signify, does not have an ultimate referent in narrative. According to Bronfen's model, it seems little coincidence that the death scene specifically is the scene constantly rearticulated by artists, who regularly present Ophelia in the
scene contained in but denied visually by the text. For if Ophelia is not always being "dredged up" to begin her progress to death over and over again, the gap in the text might begin to evolve precisely as the site of instability where referentiality collapses, the site of the threatening correspondence of woman and death where meaning dissolves. Ophelia needs to be contained by a beautiful death and the stage of decomposition must only go so far. This may explain why there seem to be no paintings of a truly, unmistakeably dead Ophelia, perhaps the closest approximation to this state being Millais's glassily blank or Stella's closed-eye, peaceful figure.

If paintings of Ophelia rearticulate the site where referentiality potentially collapses, paradoxically these representations also insure the ultimate referentiality of *Hamlet*, and by extension, of Shakespeare. Here it is helpful to return for a moment to the role of the textual frame in Hughes's *Ophelia*. The painting itself cannot refer to Ophelia with any concrete certainty, since the figure it depicts can only refer back to Gertrude's speech, which is the only place that we can find her. Gertrude's speech, however, is of course part of Shakespeare's text proper, part of *Hamlet*, so that while paintings of Ophelia almost always take as their subject the place in the text *Hamlet* where the referentiality of Ophelia breaks down, nevertheless *Hamlet* still always serves as the final referent for Ophelia, gaps or no gaps. Lacan's oft-mentioned pronouncement that Ophelia is "linked forever, for centuries, to the figure of Hamlet" (20) is accurate, but as these artworks suggest, her link to the character Hamlet is less important than her more resolute link to the larger work, the play *Hamlet*. Insofar as *Hamlet* is, of course, in turn a play by Shakespeare, the additional twist here is that, ironically, the representations of Ophelia might turn out to be even less about her history than they might chronicle the continuing significance of Shakespeare for many cultures—European, American, and Japanese traditions at the very least. For over a century, it is precisely the dead, beautiful, painterly Ophelia that gets articulated over and over again in the "high" art tradition, coincident with the fairly regular ascendance of Shakespeare as a figure of vast (multi) cultural importance.

As an extension of "high" culture production, moreover, Ophelia has also become a "low" or popular culture figure of sorts: her drowning is alluded to in the titles of psychology books (see Pipher), and her more-or-less placid body floats by our eyes periodically in media as varied as recently-televised episodes of the *X-Files*, resolutely reproducing and repeating visually the circumstances of Gertrude's narrative. In fact, the ever-popular depiction by Millais is frequently featured in postcard and calendar reproductions. Indeed, Portal Publications' 1995 calendar, *The Pre-Raphaelites*, includes not one, but two Ophelia paintings: Millais's becomes the pinup for "Miss May," while J. W. Waterhouse's *Ophelia* becomes "Miss November." In the space of one twelve-month calendar, these depictions of the about-to-drown Ophelia point to the consistent popularity with consumers of this theme of Ophelia's death.

Another example can be found in a 1996 Folger Library project entitled "Shakespeare's Heroines," a boxed set of notecards depicting esteemed female characters (including a 19th-century painting by Marcus Stone, featuring a dreamy, distracted Ophelia). What is so interesting about The Folger's marketing initiative and a patron's ability to purchase the Folger cards in a museum shop is the suggestion that "art-shop" products like the "Shakespeare's Heroines" notecards are more appealing to the targeted public than the experience of any real artwork that might be housed in the museum itself; revealingly, the patron of the Cleveland Museum of Art cannot buy a souvenir postcard of Stone's *Ophelia* because there is no concrete viewing experience possible in Cleveland of the work, located elsewhere in England, for which the notecards should be a reminder.

As this example makes clear, Ophelia—perhaps along with other less frequently invoked Shakespearean heroines—is a thoroughly marketable product, a Shakespeare-brand product. The impetus that leads patrons of art shops to purchase such items seems to be linked most concretely to efforts to commercialize the Bard, for it is to be on shaky ground to claim that consumers are necessarily familiar with either the paintings' specific literary context or even the text of *Hamlet* generally when they purchase a calendar with Ophelia gracing its interior. The Ophelia of the commercial and plastic arts seems to be in the odd position of saying...
less about "attitudes towards women and madness" (Showalter 69)—even when paintings such as Stone's Ophelia take madness as their explicit subject—and more about the success of "Shakespeare" as an adaptable commodity category, the success of the Shakespeare-products clearinghouse, so to speak. In this important sense, even Shakespeare's status as perhaps the literary marker of cultural importance, as a figure of immense cultural capital, appears to be losing ground rapidly to the market for "Shakespeare" products, regardless of whatever such products do (or do not) have to do with Shakespeare's texts. Depictions of Ophelia then, would seem to direct us unequivocally to Shakespeare's text, but do they? Instead, we appear to be faced with a free-floating reference to "Shakespeare" only most generally, a literally "free-floating" Ophelia severed from specific contexts.

Occasionally, however, pictorial repetitions of Gertrude's narrative go one step further into the representational quagmire which has developed around her "muddy death" and make the figure of Ophelia an issue precisely of non-referentiality, either accidentally or deliberately. For example, a postcard announcement and compact disc single by Australian artist Nick Cave features on its cover... an unmistakably Ophelia-styled drowning woman to promote a song that is not really about Ophelia at all. Cave's song "Where the Wild Roses Grow" does identify a woman as a "wild rose" (associated with Ophelia by the Victorians), but she has another name and is clearly not intended to be Ophelia. Making a reference to Ophelia, but only obliquely, the cover and advertisement enlist her and her watery landscape—the familiar iconographic vocabulary—to provide the image for a song of which she is not the subject. That each of the songs' lyrics in Cave's album tells the story of a murder suggests further that murder, and not Ophelia, is the specific thematic concern here. Thus, Ophelia is employed here to serve purely as an image, pointedly separated from her textual context or underpinnings; because the name "Ophelia" has come to mean reductively "a drowning woman scenario," this equivalence also works in reverse fashion, as is evidenced by Cave's cover, where drowned or drowning women become "Ophelias." Cave's cover photograph, however, is different from painted artworks that take Ophelia as their ostensible subject because Cave's "Ophelia" enacts (consciously or unconsciously) precisely that "unreferentiality," that separation between Shakespearean character and the established cultural modes of her representation.

Perhaps the best example of the separation discussed above can be found in Claude Chabrol's 1962 film Ophélie. The film, rather than being about Shakespeare's protagonist, instead focuses on the drama of a man who thinks he is Hamlet and includes the purely tangential story of a woman who must deny patiently and consistently, "Je ne suis pas Ophélie. Je suis Lucy." Oddly, the identity of the character is always in the position of not being Ophelia, as if Lacan had adapted his "La femme n'existe pas" (qtd. in Bronfen 211) for a screenplay. What happens to the woman in the film apparently has nothing to do with Shakespeare's character—there is no scene of drowning or anything significantly close to the scenes in which Ophelia appears in the play. Of course, neither is the "Hamlet" character really Hamlet: this character's significant deficiency is his trying to force his life into an artificial mold of Hamlet's. So finally, the film's title, Ophélie, does not even refer concretely to any Hamlet or Shakespeare's Hamlet; whether Chabrol intends it or not, "Ophelia" remains a free-floating apostrophe, an appellation misapplied to the story that unfolds in the film, significant only in that it refers always to "not Ophelias."

The "Ophelia" referenced and invoked by the titles of numerous paintings and other media sampled in this essay establishes a preliminary inventory that, taken as a whole, begins to look remarkably thematically consistent. Whether the example is from the 18th, 19th, or 20th century, more often than not, the artist has resolutely trained our gaze at one scene, one event. Yet unless we realize that the drowning Ophelia is a more complex figure than she may initially strike us, with two deeply intertwined histories of representation, our analysis remains partial. In many ways, Ophelia's floating body has become so great a part of our Shakespearean cultural history, that we seldom realize how little we—literary and cultural studies critics, editors, and art historians—have interrogated the deceptively too obvious Ophelia. The value of the interarts approach here is clear, helping us to reexamine a familiar, even excessively-canonical and clichéd landscape.
Ophelia has no history that is properly hers; rather the painted portraits of Ophelia are always already representations of Gertrude's first pictorial representation and must always be remembered to be so, or else we risk losing sight of Ophelia's progress through these complex layers of representation. Accordingly, because Showalter's study does not look deeply enough into the textual origins of Ophelia, her own directions for a more accurate study of her history are a bit wanting: "Ophelia does have a story of her own that feminist criticism can tell; it is neither her life story, nor her love story, nor Lacan's story, but rather the history of her representation" (59). Instead, the history of representation that we must evince is one that recognizes her as a site of the convergence of the literary body and the pictorial body. One might be persuaded to reimagine Cusumano's neo-cubist Ophelia of 1970 along the following lines: an anonymous-faced woman's body enshrouded by and wrapped in a thick veil of crownet weeds—leaves, in fact, of Hamlet. This reconfigured portrait might drive home the idea that Ophelia's complete story cannot be discerned without turning over those leaves, or pages, of the text that we must first find her in—or do we?

Works Cited


Critical Essays: Grinning Death's-Head: Hamlet and the Vision of the Grotesque

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In its perennial phase tragedy is a metaphysics of death, death seen preeminently as eternity, silence, that is to say, as mystery. The individual "pass[es] through nature to eternity" (1.2.73) and "the rest is silence" (5.2.358). These memorable phrases from Hamlet sound like a resigned acceptance of the common human condition of death, which makes us realize that the concern of tragedy is coming to terms with death—the final mystery. Yet the philosophical acquiescence will come only after Todesschmerz—if we may be permitted to appropriate the term coined by a famous thanatologist in analogy with Weltschmerz—is experienced to the utmost in its most agonizing fear and trembling and is made, figuratively speaking, analgesic.

The way Hamlet dramatizes this Schmerz is impressive; "the subject of Hamlet is death" to the extent that this cannot be said of any other Shakespearean tragedy. But the peculiarity of this play in respect to this theme does not so much spring from the singleness of vision concerning it as from the curious fact that it is a rendering of a particular mode of thinking that is preoccupied with "being dead." The thinking is pursued in terms of "the dread of something after death" (3.1.77), and this "something" involves not merely "the soul's destiny" but "the body's" as well. The solicitude for the body's destiny after its shuffling off of the mortal coil takes on an obsession with its imaginary transformation into something loathsome, reeking, and despicable.

Hamlet portrays the dead Polonius as suffering an ignominious fate. According to Hamlet's quaint, cynical imagination, Polonius is now "At supper. . . . /Not where he eats, but where 'a is eaten; a certain convocation of politic worms are e'en at him" (4.3.17-21). The corpse of the late lord chamberlain has fallen a prey to wily fornicating worms. We may callously say that perhaps this is an instance of retributive justice meted out to a Machiavellian of Polonius's caliber. (May not this imagined scene remind us of the one in which Julius Caesar was assassinated by "a certain convocation of politic[al]" men led by Brutus? In Hamlet, which is the immediate successor to Julius Caesar—these two have always been companion plays—we learn on Polonius's own avowal that, as a university student, he used to play the role of Julius Caesar in dramatic performances mounted by the university [the University of Wittenberg, Hamlet's alma mater?], the Caesar who he expressly adds is to be killed by Brutus [3.2.98-104]. Julius-Polonius is being assaulted by a party of political man-worms.) The pitiable condition is, however, not solely Polonius's. Hamlet makes a generalization.

Your worm is your only emperor for diet: we fat all creatures else to fat us, and we fat ourselves for maggots. (4.3.21-23)
We fatten ourselves by eating all other living things which we fatten for that purpose, but all this is finally for the ingestion of us as prey by maggots. As far as dietary business goes, "Your worm" is supposed to hold sovereign sway.

Nevertheless, pace Hamlet "your worm" cannot be said to be the absolute victor in this process. It will be eaten by a fish, of which Hamlet himself is by no means unaware. Hamlet accompanies the statement by a variation upon the theme.

A man may fish with the worm that hath eat of a king, and eat of the fish that hath fed of that worm. (27-28)

Dull-witted King Claudius, to whom all these remarks of Hamlet are directed, is stupefied: "What dost thou mean by this?" (29) But is the meaning of this statement so difficult to grasp? It seems to us to be fairly obvious. Let us put aside for a moment "a king" and replace it with "a human being." Then a totally disquieting situation arises: man-eating maggots are eaten by fish, which will in turn be eaten by men. In Shakespeare and other Elizabethan playwrights worms do eat dead human bodies. However, in *Hamlet* the eating does not stop there; it goes on endlessly, forming something like a vicious circle.

Note the uroboric shape the formula takes. The person who initiates this voracious movement finally meets fish-eating men. Through the carnivorous process, the initial person becomes, in the last analysis, part of other people's flesh. What is thrust upon us is virtual cannibalism. If the spectacle of an individual's corpse being devoured by maggots alone must arouse a sense of the grotesque within the minds of the spectators, the eerie sensation will be immensely increased by Hamlet's fantasy of a cannibalistic state of things.

The imaginary situation assumes implications of *lèsemajesté* in case we interpret Hamlet's saying in its original phraseology. For not only an ordinary human being but also a king is subject to the predatory cycle, and it is specifically "a king" to whom Hamlet refers. Hamlet sticks to "a king." In the face of King Claudius, he says, "your fat king and your lean beggar is but variable service, two dishes, but to one table—that's the end" (23-25). At last Hamlet's intent is revealed. What he has been driving at all along is, in his own words, "Nothing, but to show you [Claudius] how a king may go a progress through the guts of a beggar" (30-31). Hamlet's language is dangerously charged. A king is vulnerable to murderous aggression and may be forced to tread the way of all flesh, which will take the form of a procession, an incomparably impoverished one at that, "through the guts of a beggar." A royal progress to be carried out with pomp and circumstance will transmogrify itself into an anti-progress, something unimaginably demeaning. Hamlet's view uncrowns, being radically democratic; it is a perverse version of the notion that death levels all people. Or it may be closer to the mark to say that death creates a sort of festive moment, turning the world upside down. The elevated are superseded by the humble. By the simple process of eating a fish which has incorporated "a king," "a beggar" puts the king under absolute subjugation. He is immeasurably superior to the fish-king.

I resume, man-eating worms will be eaten by fish that will conversely be eaten by men. . . . *Ad infinitum* and *ad nauseam*. The conceit of this circular migration originates in our hero's all-too-curious, idiosyncratic, even pathological habit of thinking—a major factor in making this play markedly different from other Shakespearean tragedies. *Hamlet* establishes a special perspective in which death is viewed as an occasion for bodily putrescence feeding maggots, thus ushering in the obscene natural system of preying among people, maggots, and fish that will include resultant cannibalism. The topic of this "cannibalism feeding on putrefaction" can be best described as "grotesque nonsense."

Another unexpected dimension may lend itself to the sense of the grotesque when those man-eating maggots are correlated with those the sun breeds in a dead dog. Hamlet abruptly broaches the matter:
HAMLET: For if the sun breed maggots in a dead dog, being a good kissing carrion—Have you a daughter?
POLONIUS: I have, my lord.
HAMLET: Let her not walk i’ th’ sun. Conception is a blessing, but as your daughter may conceive, friend, look to ’t.

(2.2.181-86)

In the cryptic and disjointed discourse that might resemble a passage from a metaphysical poem, the extraordinary force derives from Ophelia’s being likened to a dead dog that bears maggots. Like the dead dog or "a good kissing carrion," Ophelia will breed; she will breed persons who, when dead, will be food for maggots. (In a Russian cinematic version of Hamlet and a Japanese literary work which is a rehashing in a dramatic form of the same play, Ophelia is pregnant.) The ultimate source of conception is traceable to the sun. Conception is far from being a blessing: it entails death that brings about putrefactive cannibalism by mediation of maggots that the sun causes to be bred. Can not the very conception be corruption?—"the sun is a powerful agent of corruption." We recall Hamlet's petulant rejoinder to Claudius: "I am too much i’ the sun." (1.2.67). Seeing that Claudius, as a king in Renaissance England, may be made to figure as the sun on earth in the archetypal mystique surrounding kingship that may conceivably have been still a sector of lived ideology at that time, Hamlet's complaint rings perilously defiant.

Hamlet, and through him we, vicariously, inhabits an unredeemed world in which "an ineradicable corruption [inheres] in the nature of life itself," the world unshunnably impregnated with "the thought of foulness as the basis of life."

At this juncture, we are also reminded of an unusual dialogue that occurs several lines before the passage pertaining to the sun-bred maggots, To Polonius's somewhat ridiculing query, "Do you know me, my lord?" Hamlet answers promptly: "Excellent well; you are a fishmonger" (2.2.173-74). Taken at literal value, this baffling fling leaves a weird reverberation.

These "appalling jokes about worms and maggots" are anticipatory of the Graveyard Scene (5.1), where Hamlet asks the grave-digging Clown about the length of time "a man will lie i' th' earth ere he rot" (164). His curiosity about "the tempo of decay in corpses" is characteristic enough. The information it elicits is forbidding and slightly funny: "Faith, if 'a be not rotten before 'a die—as we have many pocky corses, that will scarce hold the laying in—'a will last you some eight year or nine year. A tanner will last you nine year. . . His hide is so tann'd with his trade, that 'a will keep out water a great while, and your water is a sore decayer of your whoreson dead body" (165-77). The debate coalesces with the episode of putrefaction that triggers the wry imaginary ecology of the predatory man-maggot-fish-man cycle.

Still, much more horrifying is the gaze of the skull over which Hamlet proceeds to contemplate upon the vanity of all vanities. The gruesomeness of "the skull which has shed the final mask of humanity and wears only the perpetual grin of death" is stunning. Death that the skull emblematizes is itself gruesome. The idea of death that Matthew Winston unfolds in his discussion of black humor is seminal.

Death is the final divorce between body and spirit, the ultimate disjunction in a form that dwells on violent incongruities. Often it is reduced to its physical manifestation, the corpse, which is man become thing; rigor mortis is the reductio ad absurdum of Bergsonian automatism.
The skull is a localization of the corpse that is the product of physical *reductio ad absurdum*, which deathly rigidity partakes of the Bergsonian automatism of the comic.\textsuperscript{15}

The gaze of the skull is awfully repulsive, and at the same time it holds irresistible fascination. We may be drawn to the ineffably expressive visage. Its intense visual fixation may make us wonder whether life itself be not the "grave joke of death,"\textsuperscript{16} for, being a didactic property of emblematic significance, the skull serves as a grim reminder of the end of all human endeavors. An agonizing intuition seizes us that death has instituted grotesque comedy, or what Mathew Winston prescribes as black humor that dictates the world of human beings who must be finally turned, in absurd reduction, into the grinning skull.

The skull exudes the uncanny, which emanates supposedly from the grin with which it is so inextricably bound up that that particular type of laugh has become its sole epithet. The skull is part of an individual become dead matter and yet this lifeless, nonhuman object, despite its lifelessness and nonhumanness, is apparently intent upon the live, quasi-human gesture of grinning. The grotesque may gestate in this discrepancy. To formalize, the picture of an inanimate object beginning to look like a man or vice versa gives the impression of the grotesque; it shows the reversible concourse of categorically disparate things.

The skull secretes the grotesque because the dead matter is tinged with the illusion of human agency. There is a palpable complexity, which resides in the genesis of the skull. It is not necessarily dead matter *per se*. It is the physical wreck of its former living self. It was originally a human being that has returned to a lifeless object. In this respect, the grin is a resuscitation of the grin that the very human being may have expressed during his lifetime.

It is suggestive that Hamlet is offered by the grave-digging Clown "this same skull. . . Yorick's skull, the king's jester" (5.1.180-81). (How could the gravedigger identify the skull from among the numerous others scattered in the churchyard? But we had better bypass such a question that realism's demand for verisimilitude will raise.) The grinning was presumably Yorick the court jester's professional tact of behavior. In a grinning, seriocomic vein, the king's jester may have hinted darkly at the reality of nothingness, the truth of mortality, the essential vacuity of mundane kingly pomp and pride when contemplated *sub specie aeternitatis*. We can even imagine a prank of his, his showing up before the king and his courtiers, wearing the mask of a skull. At least Hamlet can think of such a practical joke Yorick was prone to. Talking to the skull of Yorick scoffingly, Hamlet presses him: "Now get you to my lady's chamber, and tell her, let her paint an inch thick, to this favour she must come; make her laugh at that" (192-95). But Yorick has outlived his "flashes of merriment"; "Not one now" is left "to mock your own grinning—quite chop-fall'n" (190-92). "A fellow of infinite jest, of most excellent fancy" (184-85) is dead and has become the skull wearing the eternal grin. "And now how abhor'd in my imagination it is! my gorge rises at it" (186-88). The grin Yorick wears now proves to be his last . . . "serious joke." We are convinced that "the skull is the first and one of the most important components of Shakespeare's *memento mori* episode."\textsuperscript{17} In conjunction with the motif of the Dance of Death that we will examine later, the skull constitutes the Renaissance carryover of medieval *Weltanschauung*, a worldview indigenous to that age of *contemptus mundi*, that is, the contempt of the world.\textsuperscript{18}

Hamlet's confrontation with the skull leads to flighty reveries on the vanity of human wishes. His imagination locates "the noble dust of Alexander till 'a find it stopping a bunghole" (203-04):

\begin{quote}
Alexander died, Alexander was buried, Alexander returneth to dust, the dust is earth, of earth we make loam, and why of that loam whereto he was converted might they not stop a beer-barrel? (208-12)
\end{quote}

The way in which the dead Alexander is reduced to a loamy gadget to stop a beer barrel is undoubtedly ludicrous. "Imperious Caesar" is not exempt from this sort of comic degradation.
Imperious Caesar, dead and turn'd to clay,
Might stop a hole to keep the wind away.
O that that earth, which kept the world in awe,
Should patch a wall t'expel the winter's flaw!

(213-16)

Hamlet's doggerel-like poem narrates jocular metamorphosis that might take hold of Caesar—is this Caesar Julius or Octavius?—in his afterlife, which might be equally the lot of Alexander. These two peerless personages representing the classical Graeco-Roman world are forcibly put to "base uses" (202). Broadly speaking, this is a variety of Lucianic humor brewed in the dialogue with the dead which Rabelais and his most brilliant literary successor Swift loved. In a parodic form of spiritual peregrination in the other world the protagonist encounters historical celebrities who have descended into incredibly undignified circumstances—I am to blame for my deliberate imprecision about details. In the fabulous otherworldly journey that he himself fabricated, Hamlet drops in with the risible ruin of imperious, awe-inspiring Alexander and Caesar. The abject vicissitude that befalls them, presented with gelastic overtones, induces Hamlet's deepest reflection upon the very substance of earthly glory, which is worth contempt. (Such a sentiment would be supposed to be in unison with the mental readiness for the contempt of the world.) Alexander's beer-barrel stopper and Caesar's hole filler are blatantly debasing images indicative of absurd reduction.

Horatio counters Hamlet's overingenious view: "'Twere to consider too curiously, to consider so" (205-6). Possessed of extraordinary capability of such an extreme logic that explodes with irreverent, provocative truth, Hamlet is a veritable Shakespearean fool. It was not for nothing that in his boyhood he saw Yorick as a kind of surrogate father: with nostalgic feeling Hamlet recollects that "He hath bore me on his back a thousand times" (185-86). Our hero is the jester's disciple. He has profound affinity with the latter.

There is, however, one thing that Hamlet finds unbearable about Yorick. Hamlet is obliged to interrupt the remembrance of things past in which he steeps himself, on account of a physical problem that has survived Yorick: "Alas, poor Yorick!" You stink! Disgusted by the stench the skull gives forth, Hamlet hastily puts it down with revulsion. Forces of putrefaction are formidable; universal decay is inescapable for the dead thing. Yorick's skull is now being ravened by microbic worms, emitting insufferable odor. "Alas, poor Yorick!" (184).

As we have seen, it is the grave-digging Clown who has informed Hamlet of the identity of Yorick's skull. Now, who on earth is this strange figure? The gravedigger performs his job nonchalantly, even joyously, crooning a snatch of ballad about sweet bygone love, which leads Hamlet to suspect total absence of "feeling of his business" (65). "Custom hath made it in him a property of easiness" (67-68), Horatio chimes in. Hamlet examines in a derisive manner "the pate of a politician . . . one that would circumvent God," that of an affable, yet vilely wistful "courtier," that of "a lawyer" who, while he was alive, exploited and prevaricated with his display of vertiginous vocabulary, employing such legal jargons as "his quiddities . . . , his quillets, his cases, his tenures, . . . his tricks, . . . his statutes, his recognizances, his fines, his double vouchers, his recoveries . . . indentures . . . conveyances"—all these grotesquely technical words were unable to fend off death and some of them are subjected to our hero's parodic treatment through punning. What astonishes Hamlet is that "the mazzard," "the sconce" of each of these very important persons, receives merciless and disrespectful blows from "a dirty shovel" of "a sexton's spade," "as if 'twere Cain's jaw-bone, that did the first murder." Indeed, "Here's fine revolution," says Hamlet (75-112). After such a scrutiny, Hamlet speaks to the fellow:

HAMLET: Whose grave's this, sirrah?

I CLOWN: Mine, sir. . . .
HAMLET: I think it be thine, indeed, for thou liest in't.

I CLOWN: You lie out on't sir, and therefore 't
is not yours; for my part I do not lie in't
and yet it is mine.

HAMLET: Thou dost lie in't, to be in't and say
it is thine. 'Tis for the dead, not for the
quick; therefore thou liest.

I CLOWN: 'Tis a quick lie, sir, 'twill away
again from me to you.

HAMLET: What man dost thou dig it for?

I CLOWN: For no man, sir.

HAMLET: What woman then?

I CLOWN: For none neither.

HAMLET: Who is to be buried in't?

I CLOWN: One that was a woman, sir, but, rest
her soul, she's dead.

(117-36)

Paronomastic playing with "lie," "quick," and "man" is involved. Even if it is too much to say that this is a
textual conundrum, this is a fairly difficult passage that we cannot hope to decipher completely. A tentative
reading will be:

It is a lie to say that a grave belongs to a person who happens to be within it for digging, since
it is essentially for the dead, not for the quick [the living], that is, its true tenant is only
someone deceased for whom it was dug. On the other hand, one is deceived to think that one
has nothing to do with it, since it will be one's inevitable habitation sooner or later. It is a
deceptive idea that the living tend to hold, which will be quickly belied to the very living.
Here gender does not matter, as man and woman are equally destined for the grave. And
strictly speaking, we can not say that a grave is a man's or woman's even though he or she is
to be buried in it; the most correct way of putting it is that it is that of "One that was [a man]"
or of "One that was a woman." Death forbids the use of present tense for a man's or a
woman's being.

The wit combat Hamlet was forced to fight drives him to despair: "equivocation will undo us" (138). Only by
going through this exhausting conversation ruled by labyrinthine wordplay do we learn that the grave in
question is Ophelia's.20

We happen to discover an interesting item in the curriculum vitae of this Clown.

HAMLET: HOW long hast thou been grave-maker?
I CLOWN: Of all the days year I came to't that day that our last king Hamlet overcame Fortinbras.

HAMLET: How long is that since?

I CLOWN: Cannot you tell that? every fool can tell that. It was that very day that young Hamlet was born—he that is mad and sent into England.

(142-48)

Of all the days, the Clown became a sexton on the very day of the year that the Danish nation reached the apex of glory by the late King Hamlet's defeat of Fortinbras. It is also the day when our Hamlet was born, the prince most immediate to the glorious throne of Denmark. Both Denmark's future and Hamlet's career have been ominously clouded.

Apart from Danish destiny, the days of Hamlet were numbered. On the strength of this state of affairs, G. R. Elliott speculates that "maybe he [the Clown] is Death." Willard Farnham is of the same opinion; what he has to say, recognizing the Clown for what he is, is insightful and profitable:

And in medieval terms the clown with his spade does what the figure of Death does in the Dance of Death. The Dance traditionally has that figure as a human being already dead who points one of the living the way to the grave. In pictorial representation he is a decaying corpse or a skeleton who comes from the grave and calls, one by one, upon living figures ranging in rank from pope or emperor down to natural fool or innocent child, to prepare for death and follow him. The grave-digging clown in Hamlet takes the place of this corpse or skeleton. He occupies a grave he claims as his at the same time that he makes it for Ophelia. In it he is Death itself and from it he can speak to Hamlet of bodily dissolution with grotesque authority. To debate whether the grave he digs is his or Ophelia's is pointless. It belongs to him because it belongs to Everyman, alive or dead. The word-twisting that goes on over whether he "lies" in the grave that he says is his and whether it is for the quick or the dead finally brings a riddling summons from the clown, as Everyman-Death, to Hamlet, whose tragedy has drawn near to its ending in death: "Tis a quick lie, sir; 'twill away again from me to you." 22

The Clown, who lies in the grave and indulges there in a bantering dialogue with Hamlet, is Death ringleading the Dance of Death. It may be said that, as such, he invites Hamlet "to join the dance [that] means to die"; he virtually points Hamlet the way to the grave as he is nearing his end at the close of his tragedy. Hamlet's encounter with the Clown may be considered a teleological one. At the end his purpose was fulfilled. This is the be-all and end-all of his life's quest. It seems as though the Clown-Death had been shadowing Hamlet ever since the very day that he came into the world, somewhat in the same way that the "son of a whore Death," in a version of the Dance of Death from volume seven of Tristram Shandy, perpetually ferrets Tristram out. 24

The Clown-Death has overtaken Hamlet. Hamlet is doomed.

Granted that the Clown is Death in the Dance of Death, it is undeniable that Hamlet himself impersonates Death. He "has above all that preternatural aptitude for mocking each man according to his station and peculiar folly which was the distinguishing mark of Death itself in the Dance of Death." 25 A student the Dance of Death instructs us that "'Death' in the Dance of Death has been variously styled—'la railleuse par excellence—variée à l'infini mais toujours bouffeuse'—and as exhibiting a 'cynisme railleur.'" 26 According to
G. Wilson Knight's testimony, Hamlet is not innocent of "the demon of cynicism," "the cancer of cynicism," and "the hell of cynicism." Another Shakespearean scholar concludes that Hamlet's responses are "the jests of Death" and that the diseased wit which is admittedly Hamlet's (3.2.321-22) is "Death's own." Even if "Death is not the only character whose qualities Hamlet has inherited," it is a preponderant aspect of Hamlet's makeup. Hamlet is a principal persona in this drama of the Dance of Death, a macabre medieval legacy. It may be said that Hamlet plays Death in the status of a jester, albeit officially he has no cap and bells.

In this context Hamlet's "antic disposition" (1.5.172) poses itself. Contrary to the notion that it denotes assumed madness with "antic" being synonymous with "mad, crazy, or lunatic," lexicographical investigation of the word "antic" reveals that the phrase signifies something like "grotesque demeanor" since the most fundamental meaning of the word current at the date Shakespeare composed our play corresponds to "grotesque." The etymological explanation that The Oxford English Dictionary (2d ed. on CD-ROM) gives is cogent: "appl. ad. It. antico, but used as equivalent to It. grottesco, f. grotta, 'a cauerne or hole vnder grounde' (Florio), orig. applied to fantastic representations of human, animal, and floral forms, incongruously running into one another, found in exhuming some ancient remains (as the Baths of Titus) in Rome, whence extended to anything similarly incongruous or bizarre: see grotesque'" The word "antic" comes from the Italian "antica" (la manièra antica, i.e., the antique fashion) but in its actual usage, historically it referred to "[la manièra] grottesca" literally rendered, "the manner of the grotto." In any theoretical consideration of the grotesque its basic connection with the Italian "grotta" in its derivation is unanimously recognized. Hence "antic" as denotative of "grotesque," (We may be given to venture a hypothesis that the "antic" fashion, the ancient way, could have impressed those exposed to it with a sense of regression into the remotest primordial world peopled by phenomenal, phantasmagoric images, where human beings, animals, plants, and even inanimate objects merged in natural confusion and profusion, the world as symbolized, in a manner, by the grotto. In the psychoanalytic language of evolution this immemorial world is translated as the unconscious. In our idiom manifestation of such a regression is grotesque.) Let us further found our argument on the said dictionary, this time for its definition (we want to omit historical illustrations):

"A. adj.

1. Arch and Decorative Art. Grotesque, in composition or shape; grouped or figured with fantastic incongruity; bizarre.

2. Absurd from fantastic incongruity; grotesque, bizarre, uncouthly ludicrous.

3. Having the features grotesquely distorted like 'antics' in architecture; grinning. Obs."

It is noteworthy that for the adjectival meaning, the OED (2d ed.) lists only these three items. The substantive usage perfectly reflects the adjectival one so that we do not think it worthwhile to cite it as a whole. Suffice it to heed the fourth definition: "4. A performer who plays a grotesque or ludicrous part, a clown, mountebank, or merry-andrew." Quotation from a Shakespearean text in its subdivision is more to the purpose:

"b. transf. and fig.

1593 Shakes. Rich II, iii. ii. 162 There [death] the Antique sits, Scoffing his state, and grinning at his Pompe."

Parenthetical addition of "death" in the quotation is that of the OED. Fuller citation of the passage would have made the meaning unmistakable:
KING RICHARD: . . . for within the hollow crown
That rounds the mortal temples of a king
Keeps Death his court, and there the antic sits,
Scoffing his state and grinning at his pomp.

The OED supplements the quotation above with reference to a fascinating illustration, which, unfortunately, we could not verify: "1631 A death's head grins like an 'antic.'"

The foregoing perspective is also set forth by Eleanor Prosser in her succinct formulation regarding the usage of the word "antic" in Hamlet.

Hamlet's choice of words, "antic disposition," is significant. In Shakespeare's day, "antic" did not mean "mad." It was the usual epithet for Death and meant "grotesque," "ludicrous." The term is appropriated for the grinning skull and the tradition of Death laughing all to scorn, scoffing at the pretenses of puny man. The term "antic" covers the whole range of the grotesquerie that death gives rise to. It connotes the grinning skull and the traditional motif of the macabre Dance of Death with which our play implodes. Its semantic consideration allows us to apply it to the grave-digging Clown whose speech is replete with grotesque sporting with death.

When it comes to characterization of our hero, the "antic disposition" he decides to put on proves to be a grotesque mask he wears, a mask designed to conceal his true colors and befuddle his enemies with a view to executing his revenge more conveniently. His ludicrous simulation of madness is to be necessarily overshadowed by Death, for whom "antic" as meaning "grotesque" served as the usual epithet in the age of Shakespeare. Hamlet is the titular protagonist of the antic hay that this tragedy is geared to.

The characteristic melancholy, the mythical sorrows of Hamlet that often end up in detracting from his personality, can be deemed a form of such "an antic disposition" (even if it is an involuntary one) redolent of death. Melancholy is traditionally associated with Saturn, which is "symbolic of the sad tranquility of death." Hamlet's brooding melancholy partakes of Saturnian death. If we may go further and attend to a literary convention that Saturn is a patron-god for satirists and to the satiric temper that informs Hamlet to a certain degree, Hamlet's character will be delineated like this: Hamlet as melancholiac and satirist (the satirist in English Renaissance literature was almost invariably a melancholiac) is under Saturn's influence. And that is the price of his being a genius as revealer of dark truths.

The world of Hamlet is probably presided over by Saturn, who makes such problematical epiphany in Chaucer's The Knight's Tale, which has prompted A. C. Spearing to link the pagan god to the absurd of the sort that Samuel Beckett creates and Jan Kott's literary criticism envisions. Under Saturn the world is "antic" and absurd. Saturn alias Cronos (mistaken, in etymological confusion, for Chronos ["time" in Greek] devouring his own children, drawn by Goya with his consummate artistry) is emblematic of the absurd nature of Time, who blindly annihilates what he has begotten. Time is a bodeful presence suffused with the spirit of death. The melancholy, death-heralding Father Time in Thomas Hardy's Jude the Obscure who appears invested with naked allegory is a grotesque composite figure whose actual boyhood is wholly blighted by his untimely physical corrugation and spiritual incorrigible volition of not living. He kills Jude's children as well as himself.

Probably Saturn is identical to Death, and Hamlet's "antic disposition" is ultimately Saturn's machination. . . . Hamlet is Time's fool.
Be that as it may, Hamlet's rage for punning can be taken for manifestation of the same pattern of deportment that we are discussing. A pun can even be personified. "[A pun] is an antic which does not stand upon manners, but comes bounding into the presence," thus Charles Lamb in *Elia*, which the *OED* supplies as another example of the transferential or figurative meaning of the noun "antic," no. 4 (parentheses in the quote added by the *OED*.) A pun is an antic, that is, a grotesque, clownish creature who, intruding as a nuisance, breaches courtesy in decent speech. A recidivistic pun-maker, Hamlet can be labeled (or libeled) as pun incarnate. It is fruitful to take a glance at Willard Farnham's idea expressed in his book devoted to the exploration of *The Shakespearean Grotesque*:

> In its grotesqueness the pun is a monstrous union of incompatible things that has at times a complexity carried beyond doubleness. Its wholeness built of incompatibility is prone to be incompatible with and defiant of dignity.\(^\text{34}\)

An apposite instance may be Hamlet's utterance "I am too much in the sun," which is supposed to comprehend ventriloquistic undertones of "I am too much in the sun."\(^\text{35}\) The phrases that will exemplify the case are legion. But we want to refrain from analyzing them. Suffice it to remark that in his antic disposition Hamlet is addicted to making the pun that is an antic, that is to say, grotesque figure of speech in its monstrous yoking together of incompatible things, the pun that, like the joke of which it is a prominent component, partially discloses the dark recesses of the human mind.\(^\text{36}\)

The skull not only of Yorick but also of the Godcircumventing politician, the cannily sycophantic courtier, the tergiversating lawyer, and the grave-digging Clown is equivalent to Death in the macabre Dance of Death and Hamlet himself, who is, as practitioner of antic disposition, a character distinguished by the grotesque. *Hamlet* is a gallery of grotesque figures, the gallery which mirrors the inferno that the world has become, for "through the depiction of grotesque characters" Shakespeare, just like Bosch, "shows us Hell, the Hell of man's making."\(^\text{37}\) Anyway, the gallery accommodates other characters than these. For example, Osric. To begin with, his name has an unpalatable resemblance to "ostrich," which sounds, at the least, ludicrous.\(^\text{38}\) Farcical naming notwithstanding, he "comes, like some grotesque angel of death, to announce to Hamlet his fate, and to announce it in the strangest and most distorted language of all, a language which Hamlet gleefully parodies."\(^\text{39}\) Osric was apparently dispatched to Hamlet to claim him on behalf of "this fell sergeant, Death, [who] / Is strict in his arrest" (5.2.336-48).

And Claudius. In mythical terms he is the Serpent that corrupted the Garden of Eden, Gertrude being a fallen Eve. The poison resorted to by him to murder his brother in the garden and his stealthy steps in committing the crime accord with the surreptitious, poisonous wiles that the Archenemy used to tempt Eve and eventually to bring about humanity's fall from paradise. In both cases death has ensued from the malefactory activity. (Is it workable, in an experimental production of the play, to have the Claudius role speak in hissing, sibilant intonation?) The world has now drastically changed from its prelapsarian state. "Something is rotten in the state of Denmark" (1.4.90). Denmark is at present ruled by a king embodying corruption in its multifarious ramifications. If Denmark is, to say nothing of a hell, "a prison" (2.2.243), as Hamlet declares, Claudius has to do with it (we may even suspect that Claudius's reign is that of terror, with his people being forced to live in an incarcerate environment, always insidiously watched, under strictest policing). The world is decisively not what it used to be. Something alarmingly fatal has happened. "Then is doomsday near" (238), so Hamlet thinks. Hamlet's elegiac monologue tells of the world that is now "an unweeded garden, / That grows to seed" (1.2.135-37). The paradisiacal garden has degenerated to a garden burdened with rank and gross vegetation apparently endowed with demonic vitality. "That it should come to this!" (137). The world has already, let us dare to say, grotesquely changed. In our view, the grotesque is a sign of the tremendous, catastrophic alteration of the world occasioned by original sin.

But we have to tone it down a bit. What is more interesting about Claudius is the fact that he is frequently the butt of Hamlet's satiric attacks. In Hamlet's opinion or prejudice, Claudius is "a satyr," a lecherous humanoid.
being, the fabulous hybrid of man-beast in stark contrast with his brother who is comparable to "Hyperion" (140). The distinction is all the more striking, as Hamlet praises, in the interview with his mother, his deceased father hyperbolically, even in mythical apotheosis, itemizing "Hyperion's curls, the front of Jove himself, / An eye like Mars, to threaten and command, / A station like the herald Mercury / New-lighted on a heaven-kissing hill" (3.4.56-59), whereas on the same occasion Hamlet calls his uncle Claudius, vituperatively and ridiculingly, first a "mildewed ear, / Blasting his wholesome brother" and then:

A murtherer and a villain!
A slave that is not twentieth part the tithe
Of your precedent lord, a Vice of kings,
A cutpurse of the empire and the rule,
That from a shelf the precious diadem stole,
And put it in his pocket—. . .
A king of shreds and patches,—

(64-65, 96-102)

Hamlet even sketches him in the image of the devil. In his denunciation of Gertrude's incestuous remarriage Hamlet exclaims: "What devil was't / That thus hath cozen'd you at hoodman-blind?" (76-77). The devil may refer to Claudius as well as to devilish lust that urged Gertrude to an infamous union. Taking into account these circumstances, Paul Hamill argues that Claudius's deed is reminiscent of "the pranks of Vice on stage and of Death in the Dance of Death," that "in the Dance of Death, when Death steals valuables or plays with crowns, he is thief not only of material goods but of honor and pride—as here Claudius has stolen kingship—of life, and sometimes of grace" and that "finally, this [Claudius] is 'a king of shreds and patches'—a detail that associates him again with death and the devil, both of whom may wear the rags of harlequin." There is a sense in which the enormity of regicide and Cain-like fratricide, "the offense [that] is rank [and] smells to heaven, / [Which] hath the primal curse upon't, / A brother's murther" (3.3.36-38) that Claudius is guilty of is intelligible within the framework of the so-called "allegory of evil" and "comedy of evil." Hamill's conclusion is that Claudius "is a grotesque parody of the first [King Hamlet]." (Renovation of production may be encompassed by having these two parts doubled, which is technically possible since these two persons never appear simultaneously on the stage.) Hamlet is a dramatization of the myth of two brothers who are antipodally distinct from each other. Half-brothers Edgar and Edmund (the quasi-alliterative similarity of their names is noticeable), who engaged in mythical sibling rivalry in the Gloucester subplot of King Lear, conform to the configuration. The mythical (or melodramatic) composition opens up a horizon of Manichaean opposition between the forces of good and evil, God and the devil.

One of the most salient facets of irony in Hamlet is that King Hamlet, who is, again in Hamill's view, "not a god, of course, but a representation of godly perfection in man," approximates, in his advent to this world, what his extremely inferior brother, who may be termed his "counterfeit" (3.4.54), supposedly impersonates. The comedic form Hamill supposes for Claudius is inapplicable to King Hamlet. Still the latter appears as the devil and Death. Left uncertain about the true identity of the Ghost, Hamlet's mind misgives him that "The spirit that I have seen / May be a dev'l, and the dev'l hath power / T' assume a pleasing shape, yea, and perhaps, / Out of my weakness and my melancholy, / As he is very potent with such spirits, / Abuses me to damn me" (2.2.598-603). Horatio is sceptical about the intention of the Ghost so that he dissuades Hamlet from following it lest at a certain dangerous spot it should "assume some . . . horrible form" and precipitate him into derangement (1.4.72-74). Death bulks large when King Hamlet emerges as a visitant from the land of the dead. In spite of the critical disagreement as to its true nature, this much can be said, that the Ghost, apparently surrounded with the strange aura of death, is its dreadful messenger, for what he recounts to Hamlet is "his foul and most unnatural murder" (1.5.25) by his own brother and what he enjoins him to do is to revenge it, which is tantamount to slaying the murderer. He is forbidden to, but could, tell the secrets beyond the grave that are suggested with sensational vividness. Pertaining genetically to Senecan revenge
tragedy, Hamlet is laden, to a certain degree, with crude, sadistic, horror-inspiring scenes. Horrors of Gothic nature color the play. "Blasts from hell" (1.4.41) are blowing through it.

No less frightful is the revolting physical deformation of King Hamlet because of the "leprous distillment" poured by his brother in "the porches of my ears." The "effect" of the "juice of cursed hebona in a vial . . . / Holds such an enmity with blood of man" that coursing throughout the body,

with a sudden vigor it doth posset
And curd, like eager droppings into milk,
The thin and wholesome blood. So did it mine,
And a most instant tetter bark'd about,
Most lazar-like, with vile and loathsome crust
All my smooth body.

(1.5.62-73)

(In view of this striking bodily change that the King has suffered, it is puzzling that nobody seemingly suspected a foul hand in his death.) The story of his death will be reproduced in the play within a play in fulsome reference to "Thou mixture rank, of midnight weeds collected, / With Hecate's ban thrice blasted, thrice infected, / Thy natural magic and dire property / On wholesome life usurps immediately" (3.2.257-60).

The scene of Hamlet's encounter with the Ghost is haunted by apprehension and brain-racking mystery; Hamlet's query is desperate:

O, answer me!
Let me not burst in ignorance, but tell
Why thy canoniz'd bones hearsed in death
Have burst their cerements? why the sepulchre,
Wherein we saw thee quietly inurn'd,
Hath op'd his ponderous and marble jaws
To cast thee up again. What may this mean,
That thou, dead corse, again in complete steel
Revisits thus the glimpses of the moon,
Making night hideous, and we fools of nature
So horridly to shake our disposition
With thoughts beyond the reaches of our souls?
Say why is this? wherefore? what should we do?

(1.4.45-57)

The Ghost, a "dead corse" whose "canoniz'd bones [were] hearsed in death," turns up in a clap, "Making night hideous" and pushing Hamlet off into radical interrogation about the wherefore of this visitation. Hamlet is right, "There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, / Than are dreamt of in your philosophy"

(1.5.166-67). In your philosophy, that is, in your physics, natural science.

The Ghost is a completely unexpected intruder from "The undiscover'd country, from whose bourn / No traveller returns" (3.1.78-79) and how he could and why he did return from it remain only a mystery in the ultimate sense of the word. Hamlet has been pestered from the very outset by radical uncertainty due to his inability to unveil the Ghost. Is it "a spirit of health, or goblin damn'd"? does it "Bring with [it] airs from heaven, or blasts from hell"? are its "intents wicked, or charitable"? and so on (1.4.40-42). Mystery lingers on till it is finally resolved in the play within a play in which the Ghost's revelation tests true. The interval is
permeated with painful insecurity that is almost beyond our hero’s endurance. Irresolvable, disconcerting ambiguity exists up to a certain stage, giving birth to perception of the grotesque, as the world is left incapable of rationality and orderly dispensation. Chaos is come again. In the words of Wolfgang Kayser, a major scholar of the grotesque, "what intrudes remains incomprehensible, inexplicable."45

And "impersonal," so Kayser adds.46 Indeed, the neutral, impersonal mode perseveres when it comes to mentioning the Ghost; the Ghost is called "this thing" ("What, has this thing appear'd again to-night?" [1.1.21]), then "this dreaded sight" (25) and thenceforth "it" several times consecutively. Kayser's theory that the grotesque is prescribed as "the objectivation of the 'It,' the ghostly 'It'" is strangely relevant here.47

The considerable fear with which this nondescript presence strikes the guard prompts an inverted qui-vive.

Indeed, the play begins with a question "Who's there?" that Bernardo, coming to relieve the guard, hurls at Francisco, the other sentinel who has been on duty there. Needless to say, it's the other way around; it is Francisco who should have challenged Bernardo. Apart from its being inverted, the question itself is rather gratuitous, for who else should be there but Francisco as someone standing on watch? The inversion and gratuitousness of the question prefigure the fearful secrecy that "the ghostly 'It'" foments.48

Confronting himself with the Ghost, Horatio questions it: "What art thou that usurp'st this time of night... ?" (46-49). In spite of the personal pronoun "thou," the ominous, sinister quality of the revenant does not mitigate itself. The Ghost and the atmosphere it brings with it, together with the dreadful chill and alienating darkness that govern the scene, can be meaningfully designated as "numinous."49 What Hamlet experiences on this occasion is... a supreme moment that will have far-reaching consequences upon the ontological phase of a man concerned, transforming his being utterly. The chronological sequence of an everyday way of being is disrupted; a crisis comes to Hamlet. Hamlet's "antic disposition" is due to his exposure to such a climactic, timeless moment.

The Ghost "usurps this time of night," yet it is not only a usurper of this specific time of night but of time in general, time itself, for it is the past incarnate who has intruded upon the present and by this intrusion it has infringed the inviolable law of time; it has disintegrated the solid coherence of time. It seems as if the Ghost had been cast up not so much from "the sepulchre" as from the rift of time. . . . "The Time is out of joint" (1.5.188), Hamlet cries out after the Ghost disappears. Kayser tells us that the grotesque amounts exactly to the sense of this sort of out-of-jointness (Ausden-Fugensein).50 "O cursed spite, / That ever I was born to set it right!" (188-89), Hamlet grieves. It's a shame that Hamlet has to redress the grotesque reality.

The Ghost "contradicts the very laws which rule our familiar world."51 The Ghost has violated the very law of temporal irreversibility that dictates our everyday reality. Another Kayserian precept that "the grotesque is 'supernatural'"52 has a singular vibration: the Ghost should be said to be above "nature" (temporality), since by dying it has "pass[ed] through nature to eternity." And that it has not reached "eternity" underscores the paradoxical nature of it. The paradox is parallel to the grotesque. The Ghost occupies an epistemologica! interstice.

The abrupt apparition of the Ghost surprises Hamlet and others. "Suddenness and surprise are essential elements of the grotesque."53 Its unexpected emergence that engenders horror, mystery, and the sense of "the time" being "out of joint" causes us to share in "the basic feeling" . . . of surprise and horror, an agonizing fear in the presence of a world which breaks apart and remains inaccessible."54 The feeling is admittedly indicative of the grotesque.

Listening to the subterranean voice that the Ghost has uttered, Hamlet observes pejoratively: "Well said, old mole! canst work i' th' earth so fast? / A worthy pioneer!" (162-63). The "old mole" is, as Norman N. Holland suggests so perceptively, retrospective of Hamlet's earlier dictum "some vicious mole of nature" (1.4.24)
which will court as "the dram of ev'l" (36) the final collapse of integrity in humanity.\textsuperscript{55} The Ghost, being an "old mole," is associated with the devil, who, like the subterranean creature mole, is an inhabitant of the netherworld. The Ghost as "worthy pioneer" mines or undermines our familiar world. Being perhaps, metaphorically speaking, \textit{mors ex machina}, it is "an alien force that has taken hold of"\textsuperscript{56} Hamlet and, through him, other characters of this play. In the hands of this antic force "they have lost their confidence and their orientation."\textsuperscript{57} "The characters are all watching one another, forming theories about one another, listening, contriving, full of anxiety. The world of \textit{Hamlet is a world where one has lost one's way},” says C. S. Lewis in his celebrated essay on our play.\textsuperscript{58} \textit{Angst} predominates in \textit{Hamlet}. "\textit{THE GROTESQUE IS THE ESTRANGED WORLD}," Kayser asseverates in a capitalized aphorism, which seems to hold true of the world of \textit{Hamlet}.\textsuperscript{59}

As in that of \textit{The Tempest}, we see in the world of \textit{Hamlet} that metamorphosis is consequent upon the sea experience. Our hero's sea journey to England leads to a remarkable alteration of his personality. No doubt "a sea-change" (\textit{The Tempest}, 1.2.401) visits him.

This change is qualitatively different from his former self-imposed transformation of character, the "antic disposition" that has embarrassed so irritably those around him. His voyage to a foreign country may have contributed to his heightened awareness of national identity. "This is I, / Hamlet the Dane!" (5.1.257-58), Hamlet asserts, plainly and resolutely, to Laertes and to the rest of Ophelia's mourners.\textsuperscript{60} Hamlet has attained this simplest truth about his own self that has been hitherto a cause of existential malaise to himself. Just before the fatal duel Hamlet apologizes sympathetically to Laertes for his "madness," to which he attributes the outrageous deed done to the Polonius family. Hamlet confesses—we should not necessarily take it for a crafty self-justification on his part—that "His madness is poor Hamlet's enemy" (5.2.239). And now Hamlet has vanquished this ruthless opponent. \textit{Terribilità} of the morbid, obsessive vision that "this distracted globe" (1.5.97) of his had created has left him. His passion is spent. He is seized with serene perception:

\begin{quote}
. . . there's 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. (5.2.219-22)
\end{quote}

The redundant, tautological allusion to the maturation or eventuation of the unspecified "it" discloses the self-evident, inevitable property of that which "it" implies. After all is said and done, "the readiness is all." That's why, despite foreboding misgivings, "def[ying] augury" (219), Hamlet accepts the invitation of the deadly duel that Osric, emissary of Death, delivers him.

In the catastrophic \textit{dénouement}, which is too well known or notorious (in truth, it is too Senecan for the tragedy not to be vitiated as an artistic form), Hamlet meets his death, leaving his beautiful dying words, "the rest is silence" (358). It is as if grace had come, all of a sudden, undeservedly, like a miracle. "In this play, perhaps the noisiest of Shakespeare's tragedies, the shock of silence stuns."\textsuperscript{61} The mysterious silence Hamlet confronts is numinous.

The eternal pun-maker Hamlet might have dropped a hint that the "rest" includes repose.\textsuperscript{62} It may be paradoxical that this particular anagnorisis is conveyed by words. In any event, the recognition is tragic in that it involves the mystery of death as "silence" and, by extension, eternity.\textsuperscript{63}

But we must admit that, finally, the vision has been wrested from Death through the unflinching stare at the skull. Given that in the world of Rabelais as elucidated by Mikhail Bakhtin, the grotesque functions as immunization against the fear of death through the essential homogeneity of "comicity" and "cosmicity,"\textsuperscript{64} macabre engagement with the skull has domesticated Death for Hamlet. Tristram's antic dance with Death eventuates in its transfiguration into a dance of life in which "he rather confounds Death by no longer fearing him."\textsuperscript{65} In Tristram's case, "thus he must dance off; but it is a festive, not a macabre, dance."\textsuperscript{66} The \textit{Todesschmerz} that had been rankling in Hamlet's heart seems to have undergone a healing, which has been
accomplished only through homeopathic procedure.

By dying in the process of eventually fulfilling the mandatory revenge, Hamlet has to die no more. "Death destroys death," which "was a common conceit" in Elizabethan tragedy.67 "So shalt thou feed on Death, that feeds on men, / And Death once dead, there's no more dying then," so the poet in The Sonnets asserts in a metaphysical concept.68 "And fight and die is death destroying death," a character in Richard III encourages the then crestfallen Richard (3.2.184).

At the moment of his dying, Hamlet requests Horatio to tell a story that will vindicate his career:

If thou didst ever hold me in thy heart,
Absent thee from felicity awhile,

And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain
To tell my story.

(5.2.346-49)

Hamlet is in a resigned position to regard death as "felicity" that he persuades Horatio to defer when the latter shows a willingness to commit suicide in order to follow him. Our hero has achieved spiritual maturity; he has reached a completely new stage nurtured even by religious tranquility. A horizon of transcendence is in prospect. "Now cracks a noble heart. Good night, sweet prince, / And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest!" (359-60), Horatio voices a touching epitaph in honor of him.

We should say that throughout the tragedy of Hamlet what Herman Melville describes as "the knowledge of the demonism in the world"69 has been consistently addressed by our hero. "The demonic, that force of chaos which annihilates all order, whether it be religious, social or psychological, and which manifests itself in the whiteness of the whale or the ash heap vision of Endgame or any world turned inside out upon itself, is integral to the concept of the grotesque."70 But as Kayser has the last say in this matter, "in spite of all the helplessness and horror inspired by the dark forces which lurk in and behind our world and have power to estrange it, the truly artistic portrayal effects a secret liberation."

The darkness has been sighted, the ominous powers discovered, the incomprehensible forces challenged. And thus we arrive at a final interpretation of the grotesque: AN ATTEMPT TO INVOKE AND SUBDUE THE DEMONIC ASPECTS OF THE WORLD.71

What Hamlet has performed may be assessed as this invocation and subdual of the demonic residing in the world.

Hamlet is dead. And yet closure of Hamlet does not necessarily synchronize with the titular hero's death. Horatio's story of Hamlet remains to be told. As he promises Fortinbras, the Norwegian prince, who pops up at the very end of this tragedy as its final victor, Horatio will give an account

Of carnal, bloody, and unnatural acts,
Of accidental judgments, casual slaughters,
Of deaths put on by cunning and for'cd cause,
And, in this upshot, purposes mistook
Fall'n on th' inventors' heads.

(381-85)
Horatio's recapitulation undoubtedly reflects a weighty side of a tragedy in which our hero has played a principal part. Still, isn't it a rather distorted version? Can it be said to do justice to our hero's potential tragic stature? Would the recently departed Hamlet be satisfied with it? "The grotesque is more cruel than tragedy"—Jan Kott's perspicacity is tremendous as ever.72

In a post-Hamlet world tragedy ceases to be viable. (It goes without saying that in a sense the tragedy of Hamlet itself is a verdict of death delivered upon tragedy. But that is another matter.) Whether intentionally or not, Horatio will try to deprive Hamlet's story of its (vestigial) tragic quality of pity and terror, consigning it to the genre of revenge play as launched eponymously by Seneca, pervaded with "carnal, bloody, and unnatural acts," from which Hamlet has descended in terms of genre. Horatio's future narrative will be an atavistic reproduction of Hamlet's tragic story. There is no denying that "my story" will sustain a kind of reductio ad absurdum.

Horatio deconstructs Hamlet's originally tragic story. Now that the parties to the affair have all perished, nobody could possibly interpellate the authority with which he spins the yarn. It is hardly possible for anybody to object to Horatio's authoritative narrative performance. We cannot eradicate a suspicion that "all" those events that he says he can "Truly deliver" (385-86) with the eager Fortinbras and "the noblest" of his court as the "audience" (387) may be easily manipulated in such a way as to be built in the mechanism of consolidation of power that the Norwegian prince will certainly set about. Hamlet's dying voice for Fortinbras regarding the next Danish throne, which Hamlet has also entrusted to Horatio (355-58), together with Fortinbras's own claim of "some rights, of memory in this [Danish] kingdom" (389), will be conducive to the legitimation of power. Fortinbras might capitalize on this opportune story, emphasizing the unsplicable corruption and monstrous atrocity that dominated the bygone regime of "this kingdom," the quondam Danish court, and thus enhancing the justice of his rule of the realm. Horatio, assigned the task of storytelling at the end of the tragedy—etymologically, his name stands for "oratorical recitation"—might be deliberately made to negotiate with the newly established power in a way inauspicious to "my story." "Horatio, I am dead, / Thou livest. Report me and my cause aright / To the unsatisfied" (338-40). Contrary to Hamlet's keenest wish, "my cause" will be irretrievably misrepresented. How sad! Alas, poor Hamlet!

Whatever the case may be, tragedy is over. The final Hamlet landscape that an eminent Shakespearean critic depicts is awful. After referring to the "sound" of the "musings and indecision of Hamlet" that "have been a frantically personal obbligato in the Senecan movement of revenge," Thomas McFarland closes his existentialist reading of the play with this statement: "Now at last [the] sound is stilled, the skulls grin, and the play moves toward its universal night."73 The "universal night" that the critic assumes for the play's final tableau could be apocalyptic. Perhaps apocalypse is intrinsically grotesque. And in our modern time we will be exposed to such an apocalyptic scenery. In his enormously provocative and problematical tirade, Lucky in Beckett's Waiting for Godot, a grotesque parody of "man thinking" as he is,74 betraying glossolalia and logorrhea, talks compulsively and ceaselessly about "the skull the skull the skull the skull" that supposedly abounds in the universal graveyard that his visionary reflection reveals our entire world has become. Lucky's antic discourse is, as he himself paradoxically avers at its temporary end, left "unfinished. . . ."75

Notes

I have amended the original text of this essay, which appeared in The Northern Review (The English Department, Hokkaido University, Hokkaido, Japan) 8 (1980). All Shakespearean references are to The Riverside Shakespeare, ed. G. Blakemore Evans (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974). I have taken the liberty of removing all the parenthetical additions that are found in this edition.

In addition to those I have adduced directly in the notes I would like to acknowledge my indebtedness to the following important studies for understanding the grotesque: G. Wilson Knight, "King Lear and the Comedy of the Grotesque," in The Wheel of Fire: Interpretations of Shakespearian Tragedy (1930; London: Methuen,


3 Lewis, p. 212.

4 Lewis, p. 212.

5 In his treatment of *Elizabethan Grotesque* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980), p. 42, Neil Rhodes mentions the provocative use that Thomas Nashe and François Rabelais made of "grotesque food imagery" for portraiture of the protean body: "sharply aware of the body's capacity for mutation, both Nashe and Rabelais use grotesque food imagery to remind us of the essential similarity between our own flesh and the flesh we feed it with: the devourer is devoured." In our opinion, what amplifies the grotesque ambience is the endless cyclical reciprocation of eating mobilized by death.


10 Eric Partridge, *Shakespeare's Bawdy* (1948; rev. ed., New York: Dutton, 1969), informs us that in the age of Shakespeare, the word "fishmonger" had the bawdy connotation of "a procurer; a pimp." It was synonymous with "fleshmonger," or "wencher," and was apparently made on the analogy of a "whoremonger." Polonius is a Pandarus. As a matter of fact, he looses his daughter Ophelia to Hamlet with a view to sounding the mystery of the prince's behavior. In their confrontation Hamlet bursts out to his former sweetheart in an uncontrollable bout of anger: "Get thee to a nunn'ry. ... / Go thy ways to a nunn'ry" (3.1.120, 128-29). This is equally an innuendo. Partridge says that "'nunry'... bears the fairly common Elizabethan slang sense 'brothel.'" Hamlet has detected Polonius's scheme. By no means will he be taken in by a whore Ophelia set on by a whoremonger Polonius.

On the other hand, we can take the passage in another sense, quite literally. That is to say, Hamlet is trying to confine Ophelia's disturbing sexuality, darkly associated with death and decomposition through maggots, to
an institution where it may be safely contained. As the sight of Celia shitting dumbfounds Swift's ingenuous persona, Ophelia's liability to conception (whose causation may be thought to be her seductive beauty, irresistible carnal attraction) repels and saddens Hamlet. He blames Ophelia ruthlessly, "why wouldst thou be a breeder of sinners?" (120-21). Conception is never a blessing; it is the damnable act of breeding a sinner. Conception as the fruit of sinful sexuality—so it seems to our hero—can be regarded as perpetual reproduction (in the economic sense of the word, as well) of sin, since daughters of Ophelia will successively be breeders of sinners. Procreation is a practice of eternal return.

Defining himself as a sinner, he catalogues a number of his faults, the defects that flesh is heir to. His agony culminates in a self-denunciation: "What should such fellows as I do crawling between earth and heaven?" (126-28). Hamlet thinks of himself as a vile creature crawling between heaven and earth, a kind of reptile wriggling its way on earth, unable to find any meaning for his herpetological existence. (Without much offending the susceptibility on the part of the audience, a Hamlet actor could, if he would, adopt here a grotesque reptilian posture of prostrate crawling.)

With maniacal tenacity Hamlet urges Ophelia: "Get thee to a nunn'ry, farewell. . . . To a nunn'ry, go, and quickly too. . . . To a nunn'ry, go" (136-49). Like any sexually unruly woman, Ophelia must be excluded from a conjugal life. At least Hamlet wants to shun the yoke, for unlike a fool who only is fit for marriage, he is wise enough to know what a "monster" Ophelia will make of him (138-39). The "monster" refers, admittedly, to a cuckold, a man growing horns on his forehead on account of his wife's infidelity. Hamlet is congener with the comic protagonist Panurge in Rabeiais's novel who takes such aversion to becoming a cocu that he goes on quest for the wondrous means to avoid the infamous destiny and with Othello, who is demonically concerned with "this forked plague" (Othello, 3.3.276). Marriage is a civilized institution geared to production of male monstrosities. Many a monster (a grotesque conglomerate of man and beast) dwells in Venice, Iago whispers gleefully to the wretch Othello (Othello, 4.1.62-64).

Speaking of marriage, it turns out another species of monster. Taking his leave for his journey to England, Hamlet accosts Claudius:

HAMLET: Farewell, dear mother.
KING: Thy loving father, Hamlet.
HAMLET: My mother: father and mother is man and wife, man and wife is one flesh—so, my mother.

(4.3.49-52)

The biblical proposition is given an accursed exegesis. It is interpreted to the letter by deploying irrefutable syllogism, and in the event Claudius is passed off as Hamlet's mother. What an extraordinary and yet funny logic it is! (As we will see in due course, Hamlet is a fool, a talented one at that. Only a fool has propensity for such unpredictable verbal ingenuity. In passing, the fool Hamlet and the whore Ophelia are specular images of their prototypical counterparts in one of the sources of Hamlet.) Being a man-wife, Claudius looms up as a double-gendered aberration, an anamorphic case, a teratological phenomenon. . . .

A modern student of depth psychology would find fitting material for his or her study of the so-called primal scene in the fantastic union of Hamlet's father and mother. Enormously offensive is Hamlet's prurient, even voyeuristic depiction of the scene.

Nay, but to live
In the rank sweat of an enseamed bed,
Stew'd in corruption, honeying and making
love
Over the nasty sty!

(3.4.91-94)

In their sexual life that Hamlet daydreams and actually verbalizes in the presence of his mother, Claudius and Gertrude appear as satyrs (Claudius is, as a matter of fact, called "a satyr" on the same occasion)—mythically conceived beastly figures endued with inordinate lust.

Hamlet has no right to pry into, still less reveal, the most private, secret part of his parents' marital life. Still their marriage causes another disturbance to Hamlet. Their incestuous union seems to have affected a sound family relationship. "My uncle-father and aunt-mother" (2.2.376), once Hamlet so called Claudius and Gertrude, respectively. It is a question of civil register. And how would anthropology deal with this anomaly in kinship structure? How would it resolve this exceptional case of mixed familial appellation? "A little more than kin, and less than kind" (1.2.64-65)—Hamlet's riddling reply to Claudius's greeting words "my cousin Hamlet, and my son" (63) might remain unamenable to facile explanation.

"Empson, *Some Versions of Pastoral*, p. 5: "There was a performance of *Hamlet* in the Turk-Sib region which the audience decided spontaneously was farce" (Norman O. Brown, *Closing Time* [1973; New York: Vintage Books, 1974], p. 50).

Or if it is genre that matters, we could surmise that an item on the impressive list Polonius has compiled is eligible for generic nomenclature applicable to our play: "tragical-comical-historical-pastoral" (2.2.398-99). And will this miscegenated qualifier strike us as grotesque?

11 Prosser, p. 205.


16 Alexander, p. 163: "one of the most vital moments in the play is when Hamlet, examining the 'chap-fall'n' skull of Yorick, appears to accept that the end of all the playing, and all the painting, must be the last grave joke of death." I have stretched Alexander's idea in my favor.

For this subject in our play, see D. R. Howard, "Hamlet and the Contempt of the World," *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 58 (spring 1959): 167-75. In it Howard points out "the popularity during Shakespeare's time of the Dance of Death and of memento mori devices, both of which reflect contempt of the world," and argues that "motifs in popular and religious art seem to have been employed with a certain mild humor as a popular convention which traditionally, though perhaps not very effectively, reminded men of the brevity of life and the need for repentance" and that "no doubt a certain amount of Weltschmerz attached itself to them" (p. 168). Man-devouring worms and the dusty or clayey fate that awaits a person after death, which we will subsequently discuss, are to be fixed in this tradition: "man's body was called worms' meat or food for worms, and his life was likened to dust or ashes, clay, smoke, fire, wax, and so on" (p. 169).


Because of the suspiciousness of her dying, Ophelia is allowed only the "maimed rites" (5.1.219), at which Laertes utters forth imprecations accompanied by a supplication "from her fair and unpolluted flesh / May violets spring!" (239-40). Ophelia's supplicated passage into floral being may remind us of Ovidian metamorphoses which are occasionally marked by the grotesque. But I am not sure whether it has a shade of the Ovidian grotesque. Her "mermaid-like" (4.7.176) death may sound equally Ovidian.

Elliot, p. 164.


Knight, pp. 27, 30, and 41, respectively. Incidentally, in respect to inordinate death-consciousness, Knight links Hamlet with Stavrogin in Dostoyevski's *The Possessed* (or *The Devils* (1870-72) (p. 35). When we focus on the problematics of suicide, however, Hamlet appears to be more akin to Kirilov, that extraordinary, superhuman proponent of the philosophy of suicide. Anyway, these three men are coordinated in a triptych; Hamlet shows a striking proclivity for suicidal imaginings, while, like Kirilov, Stavrogin kills himself. As Eleanor Rowe says in a chapter called "Dostoevsky and Hamlet" in her book *Hamlet: A Window on Russia* (New York: New York University, 1976), p. 87, "the theme of suicide seems to evoke Hamlet for Dostoevsky."

To continue the comparison between Hamlet and Dostoevsky, our hero also reminds us of "the underground" man of the Russian writer's creating. Hamlet's correlative to the Dostoevskian "underground" is the "nutshell in [which] I could be bounded, and count myself a king of infinite space—were it not that I have bad dreams"
Another name for both Hamlet's "nutshell" and Dostoevsky's "underground" is the "grotto" in our diction: their claustrophile, reclusive way of living is "grotto-esque," that is, grotesque. For exciting discussion of the sympathy between these antiheroic protagonists, see Stanley Cooperman, "Shakespeare's Anti-Hero: Hamlet and the Underground Man," *Shakespeare Studies* 1, ed. J. Leeds Barroll (1965): 37-63.

28 Hamill, p. 258.

29 Hamill, p. 259.

30 Prosser, p. 151.


33 The Knight's Tale from *The Canterbury Tales*, ed. A. C. Spearing with introduction (Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge University, 1966). Spearing concludes his introduction with this observation: "The twentieth century can perhaps legitimately see in this fourteenth-century poem a view of the human condition as neither comic nor tragic but absurd—a view of life similar to that expressed by a modern writer such as Samuel Beckett and found in Shakespeare by a modern critic such as Jan Kott. The poem's view of life does not seem to me to be that of orthodox medieval Christianity, nor is it necessarily Chaucer's own total and final view. . . . Perhaps the world is ruled by Saturn: this is the hypothesis into which The Knight's Tale invites us to enter, and it is all the more challenging and disturbing a poem because its view of human life is not pure but dubious and mixed" (p. 79).

34 Farnham, p. 61.


40 Hamill, p. 253.

Hamill, p. 253.

Hamill, p. 252.


Kayser, p. 185. Emphasis added.

For description of this paragraph, I am indebted to Harry Levin's excellent study *The Question of Hamlet* (London: Oxford University, 1959). The dominant theme and atmosphere of mystery in our play are ably discussed by: Maynard Mack, "The World of Hamlet," *Yale Review* 41 (September 1951): 502-23 (rpt. in *Tragic Themes in Western Literature*, ed. Cleanth Brooks [New Haven, Conn.: Yale University, 1955], pp. 30-58); Mahood, *Shakespeare's Wordplay*: West, *Shakespeare and the Outer Mystery*: Robert G. Hunter, "Hamlet," in *Shakespeare and the Mystery of God's Judgments* (Athens: University of Georgia, 1976), pp. 101-26; John Arthos, "The Undiscovered Country," in *Shakespeare's Use of Dream and Vision* (London: Bowes and Bowes, 1977), pp. 137-72. Mahood's contention in this respect deserves special attention (pp. 111-12): "To the Elizabethan audience, it [Hamlet] must have been primarily a mystery drama in the cinema-poster sense of the word. It is a detective story: almost everyone in it is involved in some form of detection. . . . *Hamlet* is also a mystery play of a deeper kind. It is a mystery play in the medieval sense and its background of a Catholic eschatology keeps us constantly in mind of something after death. Murder and incest are unnatural acts; but behind and beyond the discovered crimes lies an evil which is supernatural. . . . Philosophy, however (as Hamlet tells Horatio), does not comprehend mysteries of this order. Hamlet's own insight into such mysteries sets him apart from friends and enemies alike. Everyone else is concerned in the unmasking of legal crimes. Hamlet alone, surrounded by the politic ferrets of a Machiavellian court, knows that the action in which he is involved is 'not a story of detection, of crime and its punishment, but of sin and expiation.'"

passim. I feel grateful to the late James Luther Adams for having directed my attention to Skrade's interesting book.

50 This is one of the most vital ideas in Kayser's theory of the grotesque.

51 Kayser, p. 31.

52 Kayser, p. 31.

53 Kayser, p. 184.

54 Kayser, p. 31.

55 Holland, p. 172, says: "That fatal revelation is the disease, the rottenness, at the core of the play. Early on, Hamlet speaks of the tragic flaw that a man may have: he calls it 'the dram of e'il,' 'some vicious mole of nature,' and later he calls the Ghost 'old mole.' Indeed, the Ghost is the walking blemish of the land, the figure who proves by his very presence that 'Something is rotten in the state of Denmark.' The Ghost turns this blight, this disease, onto Hamlet himself, so that Hamlet becomes, in the words of the King, 'the quick of the ulcer,' the living, growing part of the disease."

56 Kayser, p. 15.


59 Kayser, p. 184.

60 James L. Calderwood finds this self-definition that our hero attains to be of pivotal significance for Hamlet; see his study To Be and Not to Be: Negation and Metadrama in Hamlet (New York: Columbia University, 1983). Calderwood's Shakespeare volume is one of the major contributions to the study of Hamlet in our modern time.

61 Prosser, p. 238.

62 I owe this idea to Norman N. Holland, p. 171: "and he [i.e., Hamlet] dies on a pun: 'The rest is silence'—'rest' as either 'repose' or 'remainder.'"

63 Shakespeare's idealistic view of silence and eternity (as in "Passing through nature to eternity") is not immune to deflating commentary, which is provided by Tom Stoppard in his Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead (New York: Grove Press, 1967):

But no one gets up after death—there is no applause—there is only silence and some second-hand clothes, and that's—death—. (p. 123)

Death followed by eternity .. . the worst of both worlds. It is a terrible thought, (p. 72)

Stoppard's dramatic work, whose title is a quotation from Hamlet (5.2.371), can be called a meta-Hamlet play, living on Hamlet and constituting critique of it.
Hamlet (Vol. 35): Introduction

Hamlet

Acknowledged as one of Shakespeare's greatest tragedies, Hamlet centers on the actions of a young Danish prince called upon by a ghost to avenge his father's murder at the hands of his uncle, King Claudius. For scholars the central issues of the play have intersected in the character of Hamlet, specifically in regard to the themes of madness and revenge that he personifies. Some critics have been concerned with Hamlet's apparent plunge into madness during the course of the play, and whether this insanity is real or feigned. Others have...
concentrated on Hamlet's revenge for his father's death—which directly and indirectly leads to the demise of nearly all of the major characters in the drama, including Hamlet himself—asserting that it raises the moral question of whether or not the prince is basically good or evil in his intentions. Further subjects of interest to commentators have included assessments of the play's female characters, Queen Gertrude and Ophelia, and their often ambiguous motivations, as well as the nature of the play's varied symbolism and imagery.

The question of madness in *Hamlet* has consistently intrigued modern scholars, many of whom have placed this subject at the center of their interpretation of the play by focusing on the compelling and enigmatic figure of Hamlet himself and the precise nature of his alleged insanity. Some critics, such as Paul Jorgensen and Theodore Lidz, have taken a psychological approach to the issue. For Jorgensen, Hamlet is the victim of a pathological grief that manifests itself in his melancholia. The critic diagnoses this melancholy in Freudian terms as repressed rage diverted toward himself instead of his enemies, and sees the movement of the play as leading to a resolution of this perturbed state. Lidz complicates the issue by contending that Hamlet, though he suffers from certain real forms of madness, nevertheless retains his keen intellect and at times only pretends to be insane in order to thwart and baffle those who would prevent him in his quest for revenge. P. J. Aldus has observed Hamlet's madness from multiple perspectives, ranging from the clinical, including an analysis of his paranoid schizophrenia, to the mythic and archetypal, particularly in the relationship between the prince's insanity and his roles as poet, dramatist, actor, and reflection of Shakespeare. Anna K. Nardo, conversely, has asserted that Hamlet's madness derives from the impossibility of his situation; forced to avenge his father without harming his mother or tainting his honor, he escapes into insanity. Some commentators, however, such as Bernard Grebanier, de-emphasize the importance of Hamlet's insanity, highlighting the prince's nature as kind, compassionate, and magnanimous. Still other critics have examined the political and cultural dimensions of madness in *Hamlet*. Duncan Salkeld has maintained that Shakespeare presents a paranoid world in the play, which projects his society's collective fears of subverted power and sovereignty, and Alison Findlay has examined madness as related to the instability of language and the subversive power of gender in the play.

The theme of revenge in *Hamlet* has also elicited much critical attention among contemporary scholars—primarily in terms of the Ghost's nature and Hamlet's moral culpability as the play's executioner. Eleanor Prosser has asserted that the ghost of what appears to be Hamlet's father is nothing more than a devil sent from hell to exhort Hamlet to perform evil acts in the name of revenge. Harold Sklursky has argued, however, that the Ghost leaves all decisions to Hamlet, forcing him to choose between his feelings of honor, responsibility, cowardice, and compassion. In addition, while many commentators have noted the primary source for the play as the so-called *Ur-Hamlet*—a revenge tragedy often attributed to the Elizabethan dramatist Thomas Kyd—all agree that Shakespeare pushed the bounds of the source material in his complex exploration of the revenge motif. In line with these modern assessments, Michael Cameron Andrews has observed that Shakespeare avoids didacticism by refusing to make any final judgment on Hamlet's guilt, while Harry Keyishian has seen the work as less equivocal, contending that Hamlet is basically good and is motivated more by his own moral integrity than the outside urgings of malevolent forces or an inner desire for destruction.

An increasing number of contemporary critics have turned their attention to the drama's supporting cast, especially its female characters Gertrude and Ophelia. The majority of commentators have seen Queen Gertrude as a weak, passive, and sentimental woman—an assessment represented by Baldwin Maxwell, who has noted that Claudius dominates her until the play's closing moments, when she drinks a poisoned cup of wine despite his protests. More recent investigations of Gertrude's character, such as that undertaken by Rebecca Smith, emphasize not her weakness, but her deep and tragic love for two men caught in mortal conflict with one another. The dilemma of choosing between two types of love is likewise reflected in much criticism of Ophelia. Robert Tracy, for example, has explored the conflicting imagery of sensual love and virginity surrounding her character, and has noted that when faced with the dilemma of demonstrating both her love for Hamlet and respect for her father's wishes, she flees reality, descending into madness and...
eventual suicide.

The varied nature of Shakespeare's imagery in *Hamlet* has additionally been a significant topic of interest to twentieth-century critics. Commentators have long observed the symbolism of disease, decay, and corruption that pervades the work and reinforces its themes. Kenneth Muir has noted, however, that *Hamlet* is not limited to the images of rottenness that represent the state of Denmark at the opening of the play. Muir has asserted that the play evokes a range of symbolism, including representations of sexuality and war and images from the theater, all of which complicate the play and emphasize its concern with the contrast between appearances and realities. The play's symbolism has also been explored by Henri Suhamy, who finds its imagery at once ambiguous, contradictory, and paradoxical—further proof of the play's protean nature, rich complexity, and enduring appeal to scholars and audiences.

### Hamlet (Vol. 35): Overviews

**Charles C. Walcutt (essay date 1966)**


*In the following essay, Walcutt describes Hamlet as "the imitation of an action," and outlines the relationship between plot and characterization in the play.*

One hesitates to propose anything new on a play about which "everything" has been said; but I am impelled to it by the fact that *Hamlet* is crucial to the emergence of modern notions about character in fiction. If there have been something like three thousand books and articles published on the play since 1900, it is because (and here I can make one statement without qualification) the character of Hamlet continues to puzzle us, and everything written seeks to throw some new light on the mystery. But it seems to me that the function of plot in *Hamlet* has been misunderstood, and I shall try to make some fundamental points about the action as the prime mover and substance of the prince's characterization.

In general, the critical contest has been between those who would explain the play by finding the key to the mystery of Hamlet's character and those who would reduce it to melodrama and spectacle. A third team of critics dabbles in philosophical problems, but these do not greatly affect the tides of the major battle. In the main contest, those who explore the mystery of the character make it the source of the action, whereas those who have insisted on the primacy of the action generally say that the problems of motivation and character in the hero disappear if we consider the play as a rapidly moving, even melodramatic spectacle of bloody violence and revenge. I should like to look at one or two of these exegeses and then try to look at the play in a completely fresh way.

The general terms of the contest, suggested above, are illustrated in the Introduction to *Hamlet* by my revered teacher at the University of Michigan, O. J. Campbell, in *The Living Shakespeare* (1949). His own position and his definition of the opposition are equally interesting. He begins by dismissing as the "speculations of subjective critics" such notions as that "Hamlet was … a brooding 'philosopher of death, a scholar of the night.' The modern variant of this idea is the notion that in Hamlet the desire to die has triumphed over the desire to live. Other commentators have assumed that Hamlet's grief has paralyzed his will, so that he is ever at the mercy of a mind involved in ceaseless debate with itself. Still others," he continues, "explain Hamlet's difficulty as the revulsion of a sensitive nature against the violent revenge which the ghost has ordered him to take." The corrective to misguided modernism is to "search the contents of the Elizabethan mind." There we find that Shakespeare's audience had a much more precise notion of "melancholy" than we have. "It was the name given to a nervous malady described at length in all the household medical handbooks of Shakespeare's
day, and Elizabethan doctors were making careful attempts to observe and describe its symptoms." Since in the seventeenth century people in such conditions were not confined or even treated, "many cases of pathological melancholy were at large in Elizabethan society and easily recognizable by anyone interested in human personality." In Hamlet's case, the "rhythm of his malady" is so timed that "at every crucial moment he finds himself in the grip of emotions which fit him least to deal with the situation confronting him. … With each new revelation of this irrepressible conflict Hamlet's inner tension mounts until at the final catastrophe his tortured will explodes in a wild frenzy of unreconsidered action." Professor Campbell has elsewhere elaborated his theory with the term "manic depressive" to label the malady from which Hamlet fails to act when he would most profit by acting, and acts on impulse when he should have kept his peace and his counsel.

Professor Campbell acknowledges that many students of the play would reject this interpretation as reducing a great drama to the level of a case history of a sick psyche. They would say that Shakespeare intended to give his characters just enough individuality to perform the deeds in "an exciting story of revenge." While he acknowledges that this emphasis is a good corrective to the sort of subjective speculations mentioned above, he believes that "carried too far it puts Hamlet on the same level as scores of other Elizabethan melodramas. Something very serious is the matter with Hamlet, and the full meaning of the great tragedy will never be clear until critics discover in the drama a conscious So either "something artistic design like the one sketched above." So either "something very serious is the matter with Hamlet," or the play is a melodrama of violent revenge. I know that this account of Professor's Campbell's interpretation is somewhat reductive, but I think I have not done violence to the main outlines. It is perfectly clear that he considers the mystery to be in the character of Hamlet—in what he essentially is as a man, which accounts for how he acts in the play; and he sees the alternative as tending to reduce the hero to a simple figure in a melodrama on the order of the heroes of American Westerns.

Even if Hamlet is not a case history of a diseased mind (although the term "manic depressive" makes him dangerously close to being one, in spite of the disclaimer), we must acknowledge the intrusion here of modern psychological concepts of the sort that reduce the self by classifying its eccentricities and putting them in pigeon-holes where they are seen as items in the environment. The struggle of the diminished self with its environing neuroses is a mystery of exploration and understanding rather than a dramatic action. Pushed far enough, it becomes the story of a naked eyeball suffering the cold winds of the world, absorbing agony while it fights to keep from freezing into a permanent trance of horror. If Hamlet is the beginning of this transformation, he is so, I would suggest, only as seen in the perspective of hindsight; and yet I will try to show that he must have been seen in his own time as adding a new element to the idea of man. When Pepys wrote in his diary that it was the best play and the best part ever written, he must have been responding to something that, even after 1660, was still startlingly new.

I think we can identify this element, but let us for a moment consider the range of critical opinion: Lily Bess Campbell finds Hamlet a medical case of "sanguine adust," in the Elizabethan terminology; the great Kittredge insists there is no delay but only problems Hamlet must solve (i.e., the ghost) and opposition he must outwit with feigned madness; Bernard Grebanier, after a lifetime of study, declares that Hamlet never feigns madness; E. E. Stoll reduces the play to a hasty, opportunistic adaptation of an old play, in which revenge predominates and the hero is not to be analyzed but only watched as he flashes from scene to scene in a wild, melodramatic plot.

Before we succumb to the temptation to write off the action of Hamlet and say that Shakespeare was using tag-ends of old plots while he wrote poetry to express the romantic despair of a new, autobiographical hero, it is worth glancing at the plots of the other major tragedies which Shakespeare was writing during the years before and after Hamlet. In every one, the action is of dominating importance, even while it serves to bring out character and, in the process, the poetry which expresses the characters' quality of mind. In Julius Caesar the story is everything. Its theme moves around the problems of sovereignty and leadership and ambition; it
moves through a famous story which has been retold a thousand times. What the characters become appears in their reactions to great challenges and final decisions; and their importance is writ large on the pages of history. *Othello* is an overpowering story; what the hero *is* cannot be conceived apart from the particular action of this play. Indeed, before this action he was a great soldier and a tremendous leader of men. A towering hero, he carried the simplicities of heroism, for he lived on a battlestage where he saw his own actions against a prodigious and majestic backdrop. The warrior's simplicity entranced Desdemona and infuriated the subtle Iago, under whose management the plot moved into a labyrinth of horror where the Moor raged, struggled, and destroyed even while he could not find his way from turning to turning. It is what *Othello* *did* that he talks about in the great speech that ends with his suicide. It is what he did, beside which what he previously *was* is as nothing, for he has become the creature of his horrid act—a new and terrible creature who cannot undo his ghastly mistake.

There are two time schemes in *Othello*. To achieve the psychological intensity and the headlong rush that keeps the hero from having time to step aside and think, Shakespeare has packed the action into thirty-six hours after the arrival at Cyprus; but to allow for the probabilities of moral growth, that is, to make the canker of suspicion grow to a cancer of jealousy, takes more time, and for this Shakespeare has provided a series of clues that stretch the same events out to three weeks or so. No member of an audience would ever disentangle the two sets of time clues at a single performance. An actor could perform the part without realizing that they were there. But the artistic depth and validity produced by them is one of the great wonders of the play, as it is of Shakespeare's craft. Within a single action he has evolved the sort of moral and psychological density that comes from the double plot in *Lear*. The subtlety and ingenuity of this construction reveals so profound an insight into the function of the action that I do not see how we can turn from it to *Hamlet* and say that Shakespeare was not really interested in what happened—or that he did not dare to meddle with legendary events that his audience would insist upon seeing unchanged. No audience over five years old could be so rigid.

Not until *King Lear* does Shakespeare venture to make the plot grow from the character of the hero. There he does, and with the surest hand that he was ever to show, making an action of cosmic dimensions grow out of the strange mixture of vanity, fatuity, and trust in the bosom of a monarch who has but slenderly known himself because he has been insulated by the sheer mass of his authority from his court and his family. Starting with his initial folly, Lear is plunged into a nightmare which puts out the light of his mind before it has purged him of his vanity and his overweening authority. I think everyone feels that *Lear* is Shakespeare's most tremendous play, his profoundest search of the human heart. This greatness is achieved because he begins with a king whose first speech involves him in an action of tremendous significance—and from the initial folly a flood, an ocean, a world, a cosmos of evil pours over him and crashes on to engulf the characters in an action that is, in one way or another, final for them all. It takes two plots to explore the physical blindness of Gloucester beside the intellectual blindness of Lear. When the turmoil has passed and the King has regained contact with humanity, the depths of human suffering have been plumbed and agonies of self-knowledge have been realized. The force of the action is hinted in Albany's closing couplet:

The oldest hath borne most; we that are young
Shall never see so much, nor live so long.

(Exeunt)

I say "hinted" because no words can begin to describe it.

In *Macbeth*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, and *Coriolanus* the actions continue to be grand, involving issues and conflicts that challenge and define their heroes. Macbeth is not merely ambitious: he is caught up in a temptation as compelling as it is horrifying, so that it unveils the inmost mysteries of man's contradictory nature, where rational good forever struggles with impulsive evil. As the action moves into the very sovereign heart of the body politic, and moral darkness rises to disrupt the wholesome state embodied in its gentle king,
so within Macbeth these forces engage in a conflict of appalling depth and intensity and he becomes as full
and great as this action. The supernatural itself is called upon to figure forth the immensities of his spiritual
turmoil.

Antony and Cleopatra does not have the cosmic dimensions of Lear, contained within a single spirit, but it
moves in a larger world than any other play. Rome, Athens, Alexandria—the whole Mediterranean world,
indeed the whole civilized world—become dazzling baubles well-lost for the exalted and devastating passion
that consumes while it glorifies the heroes. Armies are betrayed, fleets of warships abandoned, kingdoms
tossed aside to dramatize the relation between Antony and Cleopatra. She uses these elements to describe him:

His face was as the heavens; and therein
stuck
A sun and moon, which kept their course,
and lighted
The little O, the earth …

His legs bestrid the ocean; his rear'd arm
Crested the world: his voice was propertied
As all the tuned spheres, and that to
friends;
But when he meant to quail and shake the
orb,
He was as rattling thunder …
in his livery
Walk'd crowns and crownets; realms and
islands were
As plates dropp'd from his pocket.

And when such a one dies,

O sun, burn the great sphere thou move'st
in,
Darkling stand the varying shore of the
world!

Only with such a world backdrop could Shakespeare have glorified a destructive passion, a fading hero, and a
sensual and imperious woman. And it is more than a backdrop: it is the substance of the action against which
the demands of the passion are measured and revealed. Without these imperial choices the story would not
rise to its imperial theme. Repeatedly in the play the characters are defined through their choices in situations
of extraordinary importance: when Antony flaunts Caesar, when Cleopatra flees from the sea battle, when
Antony flees after her, when he has to ask Eros to kill him, when Cleopatra refuses to come down from the
monument, and when she makes her choice of death rather than deal with Caesar, the characters grow into
their worldly and world-dominating richness. Thus we see Cleopatra's character as made of her thoughts about
and her reactions (i.e., decisions) to these grand situations. She has her being, she becomes herself in these
events. She is woven of the strands in this fabric of setting and action.

And likewise in Coriolanus we see an action that brings military heroism into violent confrontation with the
demands of plebeian democracy—and the hero advances into a situation where he has to break the ties that
gave his military leadership its meaning. Coriolanus emerges into choices and deeds that shatter his
identification with State, with self, with family; and yet the State and the family still sway his decisions. We
no longer respond to this play very successfully because physical heroism no longer confers utter greatness:
two world wars have shown us that valor may appear at any level of society and that valor does not make for ultimate greatness. But we can appreciate the fact that the action of Coriolanus is everything; it brings the hero into new realms of the spirit; it makes him realize and enact implications of his position that could not have existed apart from this action. Again, what Coriolanus becomes is not implicit in him unless he is involved in the action of the play; it is the action that makes the emerging man.

The more we look from one great play to the next, the more difficult it becomes to sustain the notion that plot was not important to Shakespeare. If we take the proper perspective, however, we see that Shakespeare used old and famous stories precisely because plot was so important to him. It was only with important actions that he could generate important characters, and such important actions cannot be invented out of nothing; they must be drawn from the deepest springs of the society.

I propose that we should look at Hamlet as primarily, in Aristotle's terms, the imitation of an action. Then instead of wondering "what is the matter" with the hero, we shall be able to start with the simple and indeed the engaging assumption that nothing at all is the matter with him. Starting on this ground brings us the inestimable satisfaction of being able to believe what another important character says when she describes him. Everybody knows Ophelia's description, which is about as forceful and unequivocal as it could possibly be:

*O* what a noble mind is here o'erthrown!  
The courtier's, soldier's, scholar's, eye,  
tongue, sword,  
The expectancy and rose of the fair state,  
The glass of fashion and the mould of form,  
The observ'd of all observers …  
… that  
noble and most sovereign reason  

Speeches of this sort are an extremely familiar convention of drama to establish the "official" view of a character. When they are so eloquently full and precise, they are there for the audience's information. The point is further supported by the fact that Ophelia is speaking only to herself, since Hamlet has just stormed off stage and the King and Polonius have not come up to her yet. She is not concealing or probing or manipulating, but speaking her heart. Nothing in the play gives any sound reason for doubting this speech. Ophelia is not mad yet, and she certainly knows Hamlet well enough to speak with authority about him. That Shakespeare should give her so eloquent a speech is in itself evidence that she is to be seen as capable of such eloquence (as Polonius and Laertes, who also comment on Hamlet, are not, the one being fatuous and tedious, the other pompous and fulsome), and it seems equally obvious that the eloquence implies some intelligence and insight. Ophelia of course is mistaken in thinking Hamlet mad at this point. In her distress and innocence, she is as easily taken in by his subterfuge as she is intimidated by his violence. But this innocence is our assurance that she speaks without subtlety and expresses the general and "official" view of Hamlet.

Her speech tells us in the plainest terms what Hamlet was. She has described the ideal Renaissance prince, and we must start by accepting this as fact. The ideal prince was as far as anyone could be from having "something the matter" with him. He was the model of courage, decision, manners—the mold of form, the expectancy and rose of the fair state. This character has been so firmly established by Hamlet's early conduct that Polonius and Laertes characterize (and damn) themselves by their suspicions of him. The ignobility of their advice to Ophelia condemns them in the speaking of it—and the fact that Hamlet needs no defense from such contemptible charges shows that his essential nobility and honor have already been made clear by his appearance, his speech, the deference of Marcellus and Bernardo, the loyalty and respect of Horatio, and the fact that they go straight to him with the dangerous story of the ghost. These early impressions are fortified by
the magnificent courage and intelligence of his confrontation of the ghost in I, iv, as they have already been strengthened by the respect for him shown by Claudius and Gertrude in the court scene at the king's first audience. In this scene, and in later discussions of the errant prince, Claudius, Gertrude, and Polonius never say that Hamlet was queer, or inadequate, or too intellectual; rather, they all speak of the change that has overtaken him and wonder what it means. Much later in the play the same notions of Hamlet's nobility are expressed. Claudius complains to Gertrude of the people's love—

He's loved of the distracted multitude

(IV, iii, 4)

and he tells Laertes that Hamlet is

remiss,

Most generous, and free from all contriving

(V, vii, 135-6)

The belief that Hamlet is the ideal prince is universal; it is assumed in every reference to his change or his "madness." Ophelia's account of his coming in muddy disarray, shaking his head and looking at her accusingly (II, i), conveys her shock and fear at the change in her lover.

The hero is the ideal prince at the beginning. The play's the thing—that is, the plot does not express and grow from Hamlet's peculiar character; rather it is the plot that brings about his problem and his complex series of reactions to it. In saying that plot is the prime mover, I do not intend to suggest that the play is a melodramatic tragedy of bloody revenge in which there are many unorganized remnants from the earlier bloody plays which were included—or because Shakespeare slavishly followed his sources merely because they contributed to the violence and excitement. (This view makes the plot unimportant and the character created by the poetry.)

The plot should be taken much more seriously—and it will be taken seriously if we adopt the view that it accounts for—indeed produces—the subtleties and complexities of characterization that appear as it unfolds. Then instead of an amorphous modern intellectual (or a high-level beatnik) imposed upon a patchwork fable scrambled hastily together from Saxo Grammaticus, Belleforest, and Thomas Kyd (I say "scrambled," yet these are also represented as authorities whose fables had to be slavishly followed lest the audience rebel, although it is never made plain how three conflicting sources could all be respected at the same time), we shall have an extraordinarily complex plot that generates an extraordinarily complex hero, step-by-step, as he moves through it. If plot were thus of absolutely first importance—which it was—Shakespeare would have given most careful attention to it. He would have scrutinized it item by item in order to make every incident work into the developing situation and character of his hero. I assume that Shakespeare was responsible for every detail in the final plot. I am not willing to concede that anything in Hamlet was forced on Shakespeare by the fictitious authority of a story that his audience would not allow him to change—or by any grand heedlessness of consistency or relevance on Shakespeare's part.

I have seen a good many performances of Hamlet. In every one, the hero has become dissociated from the plot by Act III. Thereafter he ponders, postures, and performs, but he does not seem to know which of the fifty Hamlets of criticism he is. As the end approaches he becomes less and less aware of what he is saying—until at worst he lapses into a sort of sleepwalking declamation, going through a set of motions that are not connected by a developing action but rather appear as set pieces or famous little vignettes with fine speeches. Part of the trouble lies in the length of the play and the fact that big chunks are omitted without proper transitions, so that at worst the play becomes a series of soliloquies; part of the trouble is that the language is so magnificent that the purple passages overpower the actor; but basically the trouble is that the actor has these fifty Hamlets milling around in his brain and they are all Hamlets of various critics' contriving rather than Hamlets caught up in a formidable, dominating series of events. The actor's grip on his role steadily
weakens, until the final catastrophe is endured by an audience somewhat listlessly waiting for "Absent thee from felicity a while ..." and "Good night, sweet Prince, and flights of angels sing thee to thy rest."

The condition that establishes a dynamic and organic relation between Hamlet and the action is that he finds himself in a situation where he does not understand his own reactions. It must be shown that Hamlet is the most baffled and bewildered character in the cast. How does this come about? Plot and character meet, as we have seen, in the interplay of values, manners, and customs which is the design and substance of the social fabric. The subject of Hamlet is at the utter center of this design. It is the question of sovereignty, which is to say it is the principle that makes the state and holds it together—the life and mind of the body politic. The king is, according to the powerful symbol of mediaeval and Renaissance polity, the head of the body politic. Cut off that head and the state is naught. It is the source of order or "degree"; "untune that string" and chaos is come again. Sovereignty is the initial concern of any Renaissance historian; it is the central concern of most. It is the subject of Shakespeare's history plays: what happens when the string of order is untuned by the murder of a king or the usurpation of proper succession? The theme attracted Shakespeare again and again. "For God's sake, let us sit upon the ground / And tell sad stories of the death of kings," wailed Richard II, in a play that many critics feel to be a trial run for Hamlet.

Before Hamlet knows anything of the ghost, he is presented, in the second scene, garbed in solemn black, brooding on the fringe of the gay company that has assembled to bask in the first sunshine of the new sovereign. Claudius is strong, confident, masterful. He offers thanks to his followers, makes a virtue of his hasty marriage to Gertrude, dispatches a few items of important business—and then turns to his most serious problem, Hamlet, who is lurking somberly on the edge of the gathering. The first speeches are supercharged:

Claud: But now, my cousin Hamlet, and my son,—
Ham: (Aside) A little more than kin, and less than kind.
Claud: HOW is it that the clouds still hang on you?
Ham: Not so, my lord, I am too much i' the sun.
(I, ii, 64-7)

What strikes one most forcefully here is that Hamlet is out of the act; he has no role; where everyone else is participating in the new order of sovereignty, he is apart and aside, glooming on the edge, not fitting into the drift or spirit of the occasion. The ideal prince is a man of action: he translates the thought into the deed on the instant in a manner exemplifying his readiness, his courage, his leadership. Here Hamlet's aversion for Claudius, which alone would not disturb his princely dedication to sovereignty, is exacerbated by his doubts about his own status. He is both son and nephew—and neither; he is chief mourner except for Gertrude—and she paradoxically has become chief celebrant; he is witness to luxury, incest, and wassail—and yet there is no proper position from which he can positively act. Sovereignty is firm and confident; only Hamlet does not know where he stands.

His two replies quoted above, which are his first words in the play, have been subjected to exhaustive analysis. A dozen meanings have been found in them—and properly so, for they are supercharged, exploding from a brilliant intelligence under the tension which characteristically in Shakespeare produces a flood of puns or turgid mixed images. Only Shakespeare, I think, has been able so magnificently to represent the energy of the powerful mind under extreme stress. With his rebellious garb and his eruption of puns, he declares himself totally apart—and without a part. As the scene continues, he becomes more incisively rude, and in his next speeches he actually foreshadows the notion that, having no proper part, he must invent a role:

Ham: Ay, madam, it is common.
Ger: If it be,
Why seems it so particular with thee?
Ham: Seems, madam! Nay, it is; I know not seems.
'Tis not alone my inky cloak, good mother,
Nor customary suits of solemn black …
These indeed seem,
For they are actions that a man might play;
But I have that within which passeth show,
These but the trappings and the suits of woe.
(I, ii, 74-86)

Lurking on the edge of the company has given him the sense of alienation which comes out in the phrase "a man might play." It is the familiar sense of unreality that comes to an observer who is partly in and partly out of the scene that he observes. For Hamlet, it is a baffling and an exasperating experience, which produces in him tension and violence of speech. At this point Hamlet must not be seen as aloof, superior, or intellectually detached. Nor is he sick with melancholy. Quite the contrary, he is emotionally engaged in the situation but baffled by his inability to do anything meaningful. This must be a new sensation for him, and its newness accounts for the violence to which his bewilderment gives rise. Inability to match the deed to the thought is something that the glass of fashion and the mold of form, the observ'd of all observers, never dreamed of suffering. The ideal prince will think deep thoughts, but these thoughts will not inhibit action or replace it.

It is therefore not Hamlet's nature but the situation that evokes these violent, exasperated speeches. It does, of course, require a certain kind of man to respond so; the point is that the response is produced by the situation and would never have come without this particular situation. The following soliloquy—"O, that this too, too sullied flesh would melt"—not only specifies what is most on Hamlet's mind (his mother's hasty and incestuous marriage) but also reveals the element of theatricality generated by suppressed emotions and inability to act; and when Horatio enters a moment later with news of the ghost, Hamlet suddenly comes alive, delighted to join thought and deed as he asks searching questions and instantly plans to watch that night with Horatio and the soldiers.

Before Hamlet talks with the ghost, he hears the cannon bruiting the king's carouse and comments on the unwholesome excesses of his land:

This heavy-headed revel east and west
Makes us traduc'd and tax'd of other nations.
They clepe us drunkards, and with swinish phrase
Soil our addition …
(I, iv, 17-20)

The speech tells us what, after his mother's hasty marriage, troubles Hamlet most; the drunkenness in Denmark is a second form of moral deterioration. His distress is redoubled by the ghost's disclosure. In a state of tremendous excitement, he twice begins to reveal to his companions what the ghost has told—and twice he catches himself in mid-sentence and retreats into "wild and whirling words." From this acting, he turns to the business of demanding a solemn oath of secrecy, which is interrupted by the ghost's speaking under the platform. This sets Hamlet off into more extravagant play-acting by which he dissembles both his knowledge and his feelings; and he ends the scene by telling his companions in mysterious terms that he will be doing strange things, that he may "perchance hereafter … think meet / To put an antic disposition on—" and that they must not give him away.

Before the ghost's revelation, Hamlet had had time to think about the question of sovereignty as he saw it incarnate in Claudius and Gertrude. He had also thought about play-acting. Now personal danger, uncertainty
about the ghost's message, and the knowledge that for better or worse Claudius is the state make him retreat from a situation in which he has no role to the feigning of an antic disposition—or madness—in which he can maintain the intolerable dilemma of having to act and not being sure enough to act—or not being able to make himself act. Many forces are in tension. Pulling one way are respect for sovereignty, a disinclination to violence, a sense that more is wrong than murder, possible doubt of the ghost, and the earlier speculation that has begun his detachment; pulling the other way are murder and the filial duty of revenge. Of course, there are more, many more, which have been set forth by a long line of distinguished critics, but what it boils down to—and it has to be boiled down to be stageable—is that the situation puts Hamlet where he cannot act, where as an ideal man of action he is bewildered and furious at his inability to act, and from which he escapes into the invented role of madman. This role gives him time for speculation, which increases his detachment; it requires antic conduct, which works with the tensions produced by his frustrations; it keeps him in the presence of the murderer-sovereign, which exacerbates his guilt.

Most extraordinary is the manner in which Shakespeare has contrived so that his hero has acted himself into this state—first in solemn black, then in theatrical soliloquy, and then in wild and whirling responses to old Truepenny calling "Swear!" from the cellarge. The state of vexation and uncertainty in which he finds himself is expressed by his closing words to this remarkable act:

The time is out of joint;—O cursed spite
That ever I was born to set it right!

A superb verbal touch is that Hamlet uses the image of a bonesetter, which he certainly is not.

The key to a performance that will allow the plot to dominate, as it should, will be that Hamlet constantly shows that he is changing under the impact of events which have effects on him that he does not understand. If this failure to understand his own responses is properly rendered, the actor-hero will come through as a man discovering himself under totally unforeseen pressures and evolving under them into a new sort of man. The action stays a step ahead of Hamlet, all the way to the end.

The most powerful confusion forced on Hamlet by the action is the madness, which slips back and forth over the lines between clowning, exasperated fury, and hysteria. He is clowning with Polonius and Osric, he is furious with Ophelia and Gertrude because his assumed madness has got between him and them, and he goes just over the edge when he rants at Ophelia, kills Polonius, and jumps into the grave with Laertes. These shadings must be seen in relation to each other. The feigned madness comes out of the first tension with the ghost, after the days of brooding over the real ambiguities of sovereignty and kinship which make Claudius outside the law because he is the law and further because Hamlet is the son and nephew of Claudius. The feigning begins, indeed, as a wild compulsion. It becomes a habit and a safety valve. And it becomes a trap. People look askance at him just when he wants to be taken most seriously; so he cannot communicate, and so he jumps from one role to the next. In the second state—exasperated fury—he is well on the way to the third, where he will endanger himself and his program with conduct that is irrational if not mad. Surely it is the uneasy sense of being looked at askance that motivates his long speech to Horatio before the Mousetrap.

These drifts between clowning and hysteria must be seen as functions of the plot; that is, they are not inherent in Hamlet but forced upon him by the developing situation, and he must show himself to be repeatedly surprised by what he does. This is what makes character grow out of the action. It links hero-and-event in an exciting and wonderfully interesting sequence. It makes every detail in the action important, but only if Hamlet is as tense and curious as the audience about what will happen next … I suspect that twentieth-century attitudes make it extravagantly difficult for us to see the play this way. Drugstore Hamlets are a dime-a-dozen today because so many people do not know what is important in the world. The common question today is, "What should I want, and why?" In this context, uncertainty and indecision are more common than resolution and confidence. How many of T. S. Eliot's memorable lines rest just on this theme!
April is the cruellest month, breeding
Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing
Memory and desire …

I will show you fear in a handful of dust …

I can connect
Nothing with nothing …

Wavering between the profit and the loss
In this brief transit where the dreams cross
The dreamcrossed twilight between birth and
dying …

… Multiply variety
In a wilderness of mirrors.

[History] gives too late
What’s not believed in, or if still believed,
In memory only, reconsidered passion …

Ironic juxtapositions abound as commentaries on this condition:

Gloomy Orion and the Dog
Are veiled; and hushed the shrunken seas;
The person in the Spanish cape
Tries to sit on Sweeney's knees …

Sweeney shifts from ham to ham
Stirring the waters in his bath.
The masters of the subtle schools
Are controversial, polymath.

In this modern world, it would be hard enough to imagine Hamlet’s state as utterly new and bewildering even if we were not all familiar with the story; being familiar with it, we find it immeasurably more difficult to experience the suspense that brings meaning to the action. But we must try, if we are to see what the play meant to the Elizabethans. Everything, in fact, depends on the actor; if he really feels his part he will be able to convey it, no matter how old the story is. We must see the roles as becoming forces upon Hamlet with which he is unable to cope because he cannot stay the passage of events as they come flooding over him.

If Act I sets the stage and establishes the conflict, Act II develops that conflict. In criticism and in performances of the play, Act II is the prime source of confusion. A good deal of time has passed, the hero has changed, the action drags, the disgressions mount, and the critics really dig in … What is really happening is that Hamlet, having adopted a role in order to conceal his doubts, his tensions, and his consequent reluctance to act against Claudius, has got himself into a melancholy and speculative paralysis. His real part as prince of the realm having been destroyed by murder and incest, he has adopted the role of madman. Playing his role has further dissociated him from his true role of prince. He becomes, not mad of course, but increasingly detached in spectatorship. Once having stepped out of his real self—for whom noble action would be instantaneous—he finds that delay and speculation possess him; and the more he observes and speculates, the more complexities he sees.
He tries, for example, to explore Ophelia's heart by appearing to her as a madman, disheveled and muddy. What he sees in her eyes adds a heavy stone to his burden of doubt. It was a diversion and a distraction, a trying-out of the power derived from a concealing role; but the consequences are shaking. Ophelia, terrified and speechless, seems to be concealing something herself: a new element of doubt thereafter confuses his speculations.

As the complexities grow, the temptation to go on observing and speculating becomes stronger; but with delay the tension from his failure to act becomes increasingly painful until it exacerbates him to sudden violence. The violence itself becomes a refuge because it enables him to play the mad role at the same time that he releases his pent-up wrath and exasperation. He taunts Polonius (while revealing alarm at the discovery that Polonius is probing him) with ambiguous remarks upon corruption and sovereignty:

HAM: For if the sun breed maggots in a dead dog, being a god kissing carrion,—Have you a daughter?

POL: I have, my lord.

HAM: Let her not walk i' the sun. Conception is a blessing, but not as your daughter may conceive …

It may be noted at this point that there is no need at all for Dover Wilson's elaborate emendation of the stage directions, to make Hamlet overhear Polonius planning to "loose [his] daughter to him", for Hamlet's suspicions have had plenty of time to develop since he tried to read Ophelia's thoughts. "There's no art," says Duncan in Macbeth, "to read the mind's construction in the face," but Hamlet has not learned this truth yet. Hamlet's attitude toward Ophelia would not harden into violence so quickly; she has been part of the corrupt setting since the beginning of the play.

A moment later he runs circles around the prying Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, whose clumsy attempts to discover the cause of his distemper merely serve to expose the fact that they are pawns of Claudius. It is therefore the highest dramatic irony that the duplicity of these sycophants, probing Hamlet's assumed role, should no sooner be discovered than they tell of the players newly arrived—and Hamlet is thrust into further contemplation of play-acting. The idea of the detached actor-observer began as an impulse; it grew with the wild foolery after the ghost's appearance and the successful attempt to frighten Ophelia; and now fortune draws Hamlet into it to the point where it becomes more real, more compelling, than his business of revenge. The player's recitation of the speech from "Aeneas' tale to Dido" moves Hamlet profoundly. Many critics have treated this speech as a parody of Marlowe or Kyd, meant to be somewhat ludicrous. Nothing could be more inappropriate to these climactic moments of the action. I find it an absolutely superb speech and a deeply moving one. It is archaic and therefore a bit rigid, of course, but Shakespeare, who almost certainly wrote it himself, would want it to be different from the "real life" language of his own characters. That is, if his poetic language is an imitation of real life, then the language of the players-within-his-play must be a step further removed from common speech. Illusion within illusion must define itself by a difference in form. Indeed, this is fairly simple compared with the passage wherein the boy-actor playing Cleopatra complains that if "she" is carried to Rome by Caesar "she" will be mocked by boy-actors:

the quick comedians
Extemporally will stage us, and present
Our Alexandrian revels; Antony
Shall be brought drunken forth, and I shall see
Some squeaking Cleopatra boy my greatness
I' the posture of a whore.

(V, ii, 216-221)
Let no one say that Shakespeare was not aware of these subtleties!

Harry Levin even proposes that the Player's speech be seen as a carefully wrought mirror image of Hamlet's following soliloquy.¹⁰ Both involve the slain king and the mourning queen, Hecuba passionate, Gertrude seemingly indifferent. The Player describes action; Hamlet talks instead of acting. The Player curses Fortune; Hamlet curses himself—and so on. Most brilliantly conceived is the contrast between the Player's fustian dramatization of the theatrical, which moves him to tears, and Hamlet's "realistic" commentary on himself, which surely rises to a shriek with

Remorseless, treacherous, lecherous, landless
villain!
O, vengeance!

The ironies latent here would be best realized if the Hamlet-actor actually lost control, tore the passion to tatters, and became more involved in his performance than the Player had just been in his,—the point being that the true artist in performance must maintain a certain objectivity in order to bring out the emotions in his part. If he lets himself experience these emotions, he will be worn out and his acting will fail. Hamlet is feigning but has become so involved that he has lost the objectivity of true feigning: the play-world has become in considerable part his real world.

This magnificent contrivance brings the interpenetration of drama and "reality" to the point where the audience itself is involved in the uneasy footing. It shares some of Hamlet's doubts. Earlier in Act II, he confounded Rosencrantz and Guildenstern with teasing ambiguities over the question of dreams and reality:

GUIL: Which dreams indeed are ambition, for the very substance of the ambitious is merely the shadow of a dream.

HAM: A dream itself is but a shadow.

ROS: Truly, and I hold ambition of so airy and light a quality that it is but a shadow's shadow.

HAM: Then are our beggars bodies, and our monarchs and outstretched heroes the beggars' shadows …

Now he is caught up in the thing itself.

There is far more method in his madness furthermore than just filling out a long act with a contribution to the War of the Theatres. It is right here that Hamlet's preoccupation with acting begins to carry him so far that he cannot come back, but I must repeat that the plot brings the players on the scene, and it is in the plot that Hamlet finds with them an occasion for doing something direct and specific in the way of his revenge. The irony is that he is carried further and further into the realm of illusion. What came to him from a ghost, he will now have reenacted by the players, so that the real problem is wrapped in layers of dramaturgy which inevitably blunt the bright edge it should have. And as he becomes entangled in his contrived roles and plots, he frets and rages at himself and his situation; in the great soliloquy ending Act II (O, what a rogue and peasant slave am I!) he first wonders what the player would say if, instead of Hecuba, he had

the motive and the cue for passion
That I have? He would drown the stage with tears
And cleave the general ear with horrid speech,
Make mad the guilty and appall the free …
He is now thinking in terms of the stage and its actors, and after accusing himself of the abominable sin of cowardice, he comments on the fact that he is speaking instead of doing, which is another way of saying that he has escaped into his assumed role. And this is not all; his next step is to repeat his plan for the Mouse-trap. Having ended Act I with the grotesque metaphor of a bonesetter, he ends Act II acknowledging that he has become a director:

The play's the thing
Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the King.

The scene that follows is controlled by the elements that have been developed: Play-acting, and thinking about play-acting, where illusion and reality are united and confused, compelled to feign madness until the evening's performance, exacerbated beyond bearing by the delays and cross-purposes in which he has become entangled, Hamlet first speculates on mortality and suicide—and then turns in half-real and half-feigned mad fury on Ophelia. He is now indeed caught in the role he has contrived, to the point where he can act only through it—and where his conduct adds to the suspicions of the spying Claudius and begins to close the net that will carry him to England. This role is now necessary to his preservation but intolerable for the ideal prince. It is an image of the predicament of modern man as he slips from the certain certainties of the Divine and feudal state into the agones of moral relativism that inescapably accompany detachment and speculation. While his intellectual world grows, the strait-jacket of his role tightens about him. Small wonder that he should lash out with bitter speeches: his tongue is his only weapon!—And rather than speculate about exactly when in the Nunnery scene Hamlet becomes aware of the King and Polonius eavesdropping, we should realize that his struggle is, primarily, with the situation into which he has slipped: this makes him lash out at Ophelia, and when he discovers the two spies he can only lash out more furiously from his mad role and increase their suspicions. He has already lost control of the situation; the next scenes will bring climax and consequences.

Scene ii begins with a necessary breathing-spell after the violence of the Nunnery scene, but it is not wasted. Hamlet's advice to the players dwells on the excesses of false art—on the actors who tear a passion to tatters, the clowns who "laugh to set on some quantity of barren spectators to laugh too, though in the mean time some necessary question of the play be then to be considered"—and on the ideal of holding the mirror up to nature, "to show virtue her own feature, scorn her own image." He is also ironically throwing light on the predicament of one who has exchanged the image for the actuality. Like Alice in Allen Tate's poem, he has passed through the looking glass and shattered the real world:

Turned absent minded by infinity
She cannot move unless her double move,
The All-Alice of the world's entity
Smashed in the anger of her hopeless love.

In the speech to Horatio, he makes a great effort to justify the Mousetrap and even speaks as the ideal prince in commanding him to watch the king:

Even with the very comment of thy soul
Observe mine uncle. …

But this comes after he has revealed his sense of isolation by describing the man he ought to be but no longer is:

and blest are those
Whose blood and judgment are so well commingled,
That they are not a pipe for Fortune's finger
To sound what stop she pleases. Give me that
man
That is not passion's slave…

In the context that has grown through the plot—the ideal prince trapped in play-acting not so much through weakness as through the combination of circumstances operating on his special virtues of idealism and intellectuality—the Mousetrap scene epitomizes the situation while it is the very substance of the plot, for there we see the crisis of action-and-character as they have become entangled. Hamlet must direct his play, calculate its effect, and also carry on with his own play—but in fact he is involved in several "plays" by now. He is a mocking and frightening lover to Ophelia; he is mad with love to Polonius, mad with (perhaps) ambition to the king; he is a rational truth seeker to Horatio; and he is all these things plus a philosopher and a producer-director to the audience. He is also caught in the scene he has set, which includes Claudius, Gertrude, the court, and the archaic performance of The Murder of Gonzago.

The strange repetition involved in having the dumb-show before the spoken play—for which scholarship has found no precedent must be significant. Let us not, at this crucial point, try to argue that Shakespeare nodded, or that he has been misrepresented. The dumb-show is in the Second Quarto as well as the Folio. It must be essential to Shakespeare's plan and plot. Philosophically, it adds a layer to the several layers of unreality that have been developed and projected: there is play within play within play. Practically, the repetition is needed if we are to follow Hamlet into all the relationships that have grown up about him. Particularly if the play is presented as an imitation of an action, the complexities of Hamlet's character will appear in what he does as he acts his relations to the others and further finds himself in each act. As each moment and event add something to Hamlet's character, he must be acted as discovering himself, and he must be more surprised by his conduct than the audience is. This is asking a good deal, but it indicates the direction that will be taken in the staging in order to put the emphasis of the performance on the events (which of course include the relationships, the ideas, and the values involved) and show that as they take place the characters respond to them.

Well, one may reply, it takes a character to do something, since all that happens is what people do. Yes, but especially in Hamlet it is common to see the hero displaying himself, reciting Shakespeare, and regarding the stage and the rest of the cast as foils to his performance. The importance of shifting the emphasis to the action is that doing so brings more effective forces to bear on the hero.

The Mousetrap scene must show Hamlet trying almost desperately to play all his roles at once. He must direct the players, who may overdo it and "give all away." He must "use" Ophelia somehow in order to confuse Polonius and those who think he is mad for love, while he also vents his wrath in sarcasm because he is not sure what he thinks of her or how much he needs her. It is because of such conduct—in which only a part of his attention comes to focus on her—that he can contribute to her distraction partly by heedlessness and partly by an explosive rather than an intended cruelty. He must watch Gertrude, whom he suspects of complicity in the murder and whose lecherous compliance disgusts him; here, again, his responses are more heedless than reasoned. Attempts to carry out Dover Wilson's suggestion that Hamlet is, to the court, mad with ambition, have not been successful; yet the idea is unmistakably present in his own words, "This is one Lucianus, nephew to the king," describing the poisoner. Either this is a planned threat to poison Claudius in order to convey the theme of madness-from-ambition—or it may come as an impulsive exclamation, unplanned and as dangerous to his cause as his wild words in the Nunnery scene. Of all his tasks, Hamlet's most urgent is that he watch Claudius, even though he has assigned this duty to Horatio. There must also be time for the audience to observe Claudius in various states of boredom, infatuation, anxiety, and terror.

To convey this tremendous complexity of action, illusion, and perception, two performances are scarcely enough. If the dumbshow is omitted, it is because the director does not have anything to "say" through it, and
that will be because he does not take the plot seriously because he is tracing everything to "what is the matter" with Hamlet. It would be a great challenge to a director to convey the three-level phantasmagoria of reality and illusion, where the stately court is a false front and the archaic play is the starkest actuality. This confusion of illusion and reality might be portrayed with lighting. It could have been rendered on Shakespeares stage if one group of actors were stiffly artificial and the other the opposite. Thus the Mousetrap players could talk their quaint verse but act like contemporaries, whereas Claudius and the court could appear like cardboard figures while speaking their "real life" English. I think we tend today to underrate the poetic and expressive subtleties that must have been easy to the Elizabethan-Jacobean stage. There was a relatively small community; the actors worked together month after month; the sensitivity to language was certainly more richly cultivated than it is today where there are so many other media of communication; the greatest poet of our language, at the very apogee of an exploding art form, was working with complexities of language and imagery which must have been rendered with subtleties of acting and staging that we do not see in the clumsy models and pictures of the Globe Theatre that we know. All this would have to be presented with exactly the right balance between the bewildering action and the reactions of Hamlet. Trying to manage all his roles and his inquiries, trying to understand what is happening around him, the Prince is caught up in a fury of activity. That he is not completely confused is a tribute to his great courage and intelligence, but he is far from being in control of the situation.

Right after the Mousetrap, when Claudius has run off in panic and Hamlet has danced a triumphant jig, the interview with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern follows naturally enough. Hamlet has to contain his wild exhilaration and conceal his intentions. And Shakespeare has to give some relief from the tension built up with the climax of the Mousetrap: he knew that tension would at a point give way to laughter if it were not relieved, and he had an instinct for timing his relief in a manner that advanced or enriched the action. The entrance of these two timeservers shows that the forces against Hamlet are gathering and that he is so much in disfavor that these upstart courtiers dare to speak severely to him. At no point in the play, perhaps, does Hamlet jump about so in language and manner: he pours out puns and veiled attacks; he feigns madness most energetically; and yet he must also use the recorder for a thinly-veiled censure of these impertinent upstarts who are so obviously trying to sound a man who is worlds beyond them—worlds beyond, yet confused enough to reveal his intensity and his intelligence at the very moments when he is also letting off steam in his wild foolery and feigning madness to the top of his bent! The scene is an extraordinary epitome of the action thus far; and the short concluding soliloquy, delivered so fiercely and confusedly, beginning with "Now could I drink hot blood, / And do such bitter business as the day / Would quake to look on," and in the next sentence directing all this to his mother along with an injunction "O heart, lose not thy nature … speak daggers to her, but use none,"—this shows the accumulated fury and confusion of a man who is far from being in control either of himself or the situation.

If the Mousetrap were handled as I propose, the mystery of the following prayer scene would clear itself up. The impact of the former would account for Hamlet's being unable to come to terms with his opportunity when it offered itself. It comes too soon, and there is far too much on Hamlet's mind when it comes. One might say that the walls have hardly stopped whirling around him. He has been transported into a world of thought, and the poor figure of Claudius at prayer is a dim grey shadow on the fringe of this inner light. Hamlet must be shown struggling to believe in its reality, and his soliloquy must show how his created imaginings put him into such a detachment from the living Claudius that he must invent the pretext for passing him by and going on to his mother in her closet. There the rupture of illusion-reality takes a form with which he thinks he may be able to cope. And it is not improbable, psychologically, that an individual would organize his scattered forces by bringing himself somewhat violently to bear on a single "manageable" issue. This is what Hamlet does in going to his mother. He will wring her heart and make her see the true moral image of her conduct. But again events take command. Polonius stirs behind the arras, and Hamlet is galvanized into action. Having killed Polonius, he is again beside himself with the intensities and complexities of the situation.
He is, indeed, so carried away by the violence generated in killing Polonius that he goes on and on in his attack on Gertrude until the ghost himself intervenes to protect her. Here the confusions of illusion and reality multiply with a vengeance. The outraged spirit of Hamlet's father comes back a second time to protect the incestuous queen who has figured so largely in the court life that dismays Hamlet. And here Hamlet learns not only that Gertrude was innocent of any part in the murder of her husband but also something of the utmost importance—namely, that the ghost is genuine.

Three centuries of critics have explored the question whether the ghost is "a spirit of health or goblin damned," and from a hundred angles. At one extreme it is dismissed as a trivial matter; at the other extreme it is the question that accounts for Hamlet's delay. I think Hamlet believed the ghost when he first saw it but came to doubt it as he doubted everything when the tensions and contradictions in his situation became overpowering. When the ghost intervenes to protect Gertrude, he proves beyond any shadow of a doubt that he is indeed the ghost of the dead king. Only a true spirit would show such tender concern for his lost and faithless wife. Yet this important proof has been largely ignored by the critics—because they are no longer interested in the action. The question of "what is the matter with Hamlet" comes to a dead end, a paralysis, with the prayer scene, and the play seems to break in two at that point for the psycho-philosophical critics.

The arguments for sparing Claudius are too horrible, so horrible that many critics have been reduced to saying that Hamlet must spare Claudius in order to permit a fourth and fifth act! Not knowing why he fails to kill Claudius, they have no bridge to the next scene, in the queen's closet. The "action" has become only a patchwork assembled to give Hamlet a stage for ranting over the praying king and, presently, the obtuse and libidinous queen.

But if the action is taken seriously, we can see the complexity of event-and-reaction that Shakespeare has contrived. From the dim praying king, Hamlet goes to the guilty queen. Killing Polonius, he is himself galvanized to fury. The ghost comes to protect the queen and, as he says, "to whet thy almost blunted purpose," and for a moment he does succeed in bringing Hamlet back to a more controlled and reasonable disposition. But right here another factor comes to bear: the queen thinks Hamlet is indeed mad, because she does not see the ghost, and the exasperation of trying to convince Gertrude that he is not mad, so that he can bring her thoughts back to her own guilt, raises him immediately to a new pitch of fury. He goes on and on with his lecture, but, between the queen's terror of his violence and her desire to ignore his "mad" reproofs, he has lost what slight control of the situation he might have gained. He is right, and his words are wonderfully eloquent, but Gertrude has neither the desire nor the ability to see this Tightness through the chaos of violence in which she is plunged. We don't carry on a quiet talk about morals while the body of a murdered counsellor is lying, still warm, a few feet away! Yet Hamlet has not time to wait for a calmer hour; he must make matters worse by driving ahead, and his very lucidity only furthers the queen's bewilderment.

Interpreters of the first scene in Act IV have a way of assuming that Shakespeare has not written what he intended and so must be "explained." If they want to argue that Hamlet has convinced Gertrude of his sanity in the previous scene, they then claim that Gertrude is pretending in this scene; but elsewhere they tell us that Shakespeare frequently gives the most explicit stage directions right in the dialogue. He does, and nowhere are these directions more precise than here. Claudius says, "There's matter in these sighs, these profound heaves; / You must translate; 'tis fit we understand them." Sighs and profound heaves do not describe terror but sorrow—nothing else. Gertrude is heaving deep, sorrowful sighs because she knows now that Hamlet is mad. And when she says he is "Mad as the seas and wind, when both contend / Which is the mightier. In his lawless fit, / Behind the arras hearing something stir, / He whips his rapier out, and cries, 'A rat, a rat!' / And, in his brainish apprehension, kills / The unseen good old man," she is saying exactly what she believes. This is no time—and there is not that much room in the drama—for a while new set of speculations about Gertrude's motives, or about her pretending now in order to protect Hamlet from the king's wrath. She has not been convinced; she has not come over to Hamlet's side; simple-mindedly as always she has reacted as almost anyone would react when a son raves and raves and then sees a ghost that isn't there.
The point of this scene is that Hamlet's roles have taken over. He has spoken with brilliance, deep feeling, and great lucidity. The audience understands him perfectly. It must also be allowed to understand that Hamlet has complete and utterly failed to get his message across to his mother. This is the final irony and the final step in his isolation: his mother loves him, and yet she has not "heard" a word that he has said to her. Grieving deeply, she only wants to get him out of the country, and she utters no word opposing Claudius's decision to send him to England. Claudius, of course, knows better; he understands Hamlet almost as well as the audience does. He certainly grasps the practical aspects of the problem, and he acts instantly to get Hamlet out of the way. In fact, the communication between Hamlet and Claudius has always been pretty accurate. When Rosencrantz and Guildenstern appear to put Hamlet, in effect, under arrest (IV, ii), he feigns madness to the top of his impudent bent, even while letting the audience feel his confusion, his justified rage, and his desperation at having worked himself into a situation where he cannot act—to say nothing of his having thought so much about it that he has got out of the way of acting. But when these rascals bring Hamlet to the king, there is a real moment of truth when between the pass and fell incensed points, the mighty opposites look one another in the eye with total, but secret, understanding:

Claud: … The bark is ready, and the wind
      at help,
The associates tend, and everything is bent
      For England.
Ham: For England?
Claud: Ay, Hamlet.
Ham: Good.

Claud: SO is it, if thou knew'st our purposes.
Ham: I see a cherub that sees them.

Such directness is now neither irresponsible nor a luxury, for Claudius has already signed the order for Hamlet's death. This moment of truth is the lowest ebb of the hero's fortune up to this point; now, in whatever role, he has lost not only the initiative but also his freedom of action—and almost his life.

In the rest of Act IV and the first scenes of Act V, we have a typical Shakespearean device: the action slows down and spreads out, so that the audience has time to assimilate the meaning of what has happened and become ready to receive the full impact and meaning of what follows. If we have followed Hamlet up to this point, we have seen an ideal Renaissance prince becoming entrapped by situations and responses to them that make him detached, speculative, philosophical—and also alienated among his unstable, unpractical roles—and also exasperated and violent both because of his inability to act and to communicate and because of seeing himself performing in a manner that is totally surprising to him.

Now with the fourth-act expansion and relaxation, we have time to grasp and feel what Hamlet has become: He has become wiser and deeper. He does not feel quite so close to his burden of revenge; he is not hemmed-in and exasperated; and he is thinking of man in larger perspectives than he could have before. This summary is of course a barren thing beside the wonders of Shakespeare's poetry; it is meant only to indicate what the audience will feel if the performance has brought it up through a consistent action in which the actor has developed with the characterization so that he thinks his lines instead of merely reciting them.

If Hamlet is more objective, he is also more removed from the immediate pressure of bloody revenge: the examples of a drunken, lustful king and a complaisant mother are not before his eyes. Yet the problem remains. The ideal prince is still burdened with his grisly duty, which honor enjoins as severely as it ever did. And Hamlet still knows, still accepts it, but with the great difference that is expressed in his humorous and philosophical attitude toward the gravediggers. He has placed the warring elements in a perspective, not of resignation but of wisdom, the depth of which makes the contrast between Hamlet and the twentieth-century
hollow man appear vast indeed. Today's hero would continue to doubt everything, and the story would end in
guilt and despair, with perhaps some adventitious affirmation of the essential dignity of man. I say
adventitious because although deeply felt it would not have been realized in the action. Hamlet's insights do
not make him doubt the essential values of his world. If he has lamented being its scourge and minister, yet he
has accepted the task and has now grown more convinced of its dignity and importance. The cost of such
wisdom is that he returns to Denmark not knowing how the forces against him will be organized.

And of course the facts soon fly at him thick and fast. When he sees Ophelia being buried with maimed rites
and the crass Laertes beating his breast in the grave, his wild roles take instant possession, and an ultimate
epitome of his feigning-mad-furious-hysteria occurs. Never was Hamlet so earnestly idealistic, never does he
appear more insane to the others, and never does he play more openly into the hands of his enemies. What he
has lived through in the previous Acts is now a part of him that he cannot slough off. Nor can the perspective
of wisdom and insight, once gained, stop the various counter-movements he has set in motion in the costly
process of gaining it.

He reaffirms his clear knowledge of his duty:

Does it not, thinks't thee, stand me now
upon—
He that hath kill'd my king and whor'd my
mother,
Popp'd in between the election and my hopes,
Thrown out his angle for my proper life,
And with such cozenage—is't not perfect
conscience
To quit him with this arm? And is't not to be
damn'd
To let this canker of our nature come
In further evil?
Hor: It must be shortly known to him from
England
What is the issue of the business there.
Ham: It will be short; the interim is mine,
And a man's life's no more than to say
"One."
(V, ii, 63-74)

And a few moments later he balances this with the moving fatalism of a speech in which he shows that he is
now caught in a grand action which he may not be able to dominate—or even survive:

Not a whit; we defy augury. There's 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 has aught of what he leaves, what is't to leave betimes? Let be.

(V, ii, 230-235)

From this level of humor, wisdom, and acceptance, Hamlet goes into the final catastrophic action where he
acquits himself magnificently. Here, finally, the mocking, the feigning, and the uncontrolled fury are absent.
He reaches the top of his princely greatness in matching the combined trickery of Claudius and
Laertes—matching only, for mastering it would be too much to expect.
I have not discussed these latter scenes in great detail because in them the power and dominance of the plot is absolute, overpoweringly so in the final scene; and if the audience has been taken along with a consistent, growing Hamlet up to the middle of Act IV, there is little fear that the interpretation will go astray thereafter. Indeed, the character developed will cast a dazzling light on the closing action. Throughout this discussion, I have touched very lightly on the satiric humor, the good nature, and the verbal brilliance of Hamlet—not because these do not contribute enormously to his personality and to our pleasure in the play, but because I have tried to restrict myself to the particular problem of the relation of characterization to plot. The constant presence of these elements, which Aristotle called ethos and intellect, cannot be missed.

Notes

1 New York, 1949, p. 744.

2 Ibid., p. 745.

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid.

5 Shakespeare's Tragic Heroes.

6 Kittredge's Notes to his edition.

7 The Heart of Hamlet, N. Y., 1960.

8 Art and Artifice in Shakespeare, N. Y., 1951.

9 What Happens in Hamlet, p. 108.

10 The Question of Hamlet, New York, 1959, pp. 156ff.

11 Dover Wilson discusses this fact at length in What Happens in Hamlet.

Arthur Kirsch (essay date 1981)


[In this essay, Kirsch examines the theme of grief in Hamlet, arguing that the betrayed character of Hamlet suffers throughout the play in a manner more consistent with a state of mourning than one of melancholy and mental derangement.]

Hamlet is a tragedy perhaps most often, and justly, admired for its intellectual energy. Hamlet's mind comprehends a universe of ideas, and he astonishes us with the copiousness and eloquence and luminousness of his thoughts. But I think we should remember, as Hamlet is compelled to remember, that behind these thoughts, and usually their occasion, is a continuous and tremendous experience of pain and suffering. We are accustomed to thinking of the other major tragedies, Lear and Othello especially, as plays whose greatest genius lies in the depiction of the deepest movements of human feeling. I think we should attend to such movements in Hamlet as well. As Hamlet himself tells us, it is his heart which he unpacks with words, it is against what he calls the "heart-ache" (III. 1.62)¹ of human existence that he protests in his most famous soliloquy (and this is the first use of the term in that sense the OED records), and there are few plays in the canon in which the word "heart" itself is more prominent.
Hamlet is a revenge play, and judging by the prodigious number of performances, parodies, and editions of The Spanish Tragedy alone, the genre enjoyed an extraordinary popularity on the Elizabethan stage. Part of the reason for that popularity is the theatrical power of the revenge motif itself. The quest for vengeance satisfies an audience's most primitive wishes for intrigue and violence. "The Tragic Auditory," as Charles Lamb once remarked, "wants blood," and the revenge motif provides it in abundance. Equally important, it gives significant shape to the plot and sustained energy to the action. But if vengeance composes the plot of the revenge play, grief composes its essential emotional content, its substance. There is a character in Marlowe's Jew of Malta who, finding the body of his son killed in a duel, cries out in his loss that he wishes his son had been murdered so that he could avenge his death. It is a casual line, but it suggests a deep connection between anger and sorrow in the revenge play genre itself which both Kyd and Shakespeare draw upon profoundly. At the end of The Spanish Tragedy the ghost of Andrea says, "Ay, now my hopes have end in their effects, / When blood and sorrow finish my desires," and it was unquestionably Kyd's brilliance in representing the elemental power of sorrow, as well as of blood, that enabled the revenge genre to establish so large a claim on the Elizabethan theatrical imagination. The speeches in which Hieronimo gives voice to his grief, including the famous, "Oh eyes! no eyes, but fountains fraught with tears; / Oh life! no life, but lively form of death," were parodied for decades after their first performance, so great was their impact, and the moving figure of an old man maddened with grief over the loss of his son was a major part of Shakespeare's theatrical inheritance.

In Shakespeare's play it is Hamlet himself who talks explicitly of sorrow and blood, relating them directly to the ghost as well as each other in the scene in his mother's bedchamber in which the ghost appears for the last time. "Look you," he tells his mother, who characteristically cannot see the ghost,

how pale he glares.
   His form and cause conjoin'd, preaching to
      stones,
   Would make them capable.—Do not look
      upon me
   Lest with this piteous action you convert
      My stern effects; then what I have to do
   Will want true colour—tears perchance for blood.

   (III.4.125)

These lines suggest synapses between grief and vengeance which help make the whole relation between the plot and emotional content of Hamlet intelligible, but of more immediate importance to an understanding of the play is Hamlet's own emphasis in this speech, his focus on his grief and the profound impact which the ghost has upon it.

The note of grief is sounded by Hamlet in his first words in the play, before he ever sees the ghost, in his opening dialogue with the King and his mother. The Queen says to him:

   Good Hamlet, cast thy nighted colour off,
   And let thine eye look like a friend on
      Denmark.
   Do not for ever with thy vailed lids
   Seek for thy noble father in the dust.
   Thou know'st 'tis common—all that lives
      must die,
   Passing through nature to eternity.

   (1.2.68)
Hamlet answers, "Ay, madam, it is common," "If it be, / Why seems it so particular with thee?" she says; and he responds,

Seems, madam! Nay, it is; I know not seems.  
'Tis not alone my inky cloak, good mother,  
Nor customary suits of solemn black,  
Nor windy suspiration of forc'd breath,  
No, nor the fruitful river in the eye,  
Nor the dejected haviour of the visage,  
Together with all forms, moods, shapes of grief,  
That can denote me truly. These, indeed, seem;  
For they are actions that a man might play;  
But I have that within which passes show—  
These but the trappings and the suits of woe.

Though Hamlet's use of the conventional Elizabethan forms of mourning expresses his hostility to an unfeeling court, he is at the same time speaking deeply of an experience which everyone who has lost someone close to him must recognize. He is speaking of the early stages of grief, of its shock, of its inner and still hidden sense of loss, and trying to describe what is not fully describable—the literally inexpressible wound whose immediate consequence is the dislocation, if not transvaluation, of our customary perceptions and feelings and attachments to life. It is no accident that this speech sets in motion Hamlet's preoccupation with seeming and being, including the whole train of images of acting which is crystallized in the play within the play. The peculiar centripetal pull of anger and sorrow which the speech depicts remains as the central undercurrent of that preoccupation, most notably in Hamlet's later soliloquy about the player's imitation of Hecuba's grief:

Is it not monstrous that this player here,  
But in a fiction, in a dream of passion,  
Could force his soul so to his own conceit  
That from her working all his visage wann'd;  
Tears in his eyes, distraction in's aspect,  
A broken voice, and his whole function  
suiting  
With forms to his conceit? And all for nothing!  
For Hecuba!  
What's Hecuba to him or he to Hecuba,  
That he should weep for her? What would he do,  
Had he the motive and the cue for passion  
That I have?  

(II.2.544)

Hamlet then goes on to rebuke himself for his own inaction, but the player's imitation of grief nonetheless moves him internally, as nothing else can, in fact to take action, as he conceives of the idea of staging a play to test both the ghost and the conscience of the King.

After Hamlet finishes answering his mother in the earlier court scene, the King offers his own consolation for Hamlet's grief:
There is much in this consolation of philosophy which is spiritually and psychologically sound, and to which every human being must eventually accommodate himself, but it comes at the wrong time, from the wrong person, and in its essential belittlement of the heart-ache of grief, it comes with the wrong inflection. It is a dispiriting irony of scholarship on this play that so many psychoanalytic and theological critics should essentially take such words, from such a King, as a text for their own indictments of Hamlet's behavior. What a person who is grieving needs, of course, is not the consolation of words, even words which are true, but sympathy—and this Hamlet does not receive, not from the court, not from his uncle, and more important, not from his own mother, to whom his grief over his father's death is alien and unwelcome.

After the King and Queen leave the stage, it is to his mother's lack of sympathy not only for him but for her dead husband that Hamlet turns in particular pain:

O, that this too too solid flesh would melt,
Thaw, and resolve itself into a dew!
Or that the Everlasting had not fix'd
His canon 'gainst self-slaughter! O God! God!
How weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable,
Seem to me all the uses of this world!
Fie on't! Ah, fie! 'tis an unweeded garden,
That grows to seed; things rank and gross in nature
Possess it merely. That it should come to this!
But two months dead! Nay, not so much, not two.
So excellent a king that was to this
Hyperion to a satyr; so loving to my mother,
That he might not beteem the winds of heaven
Visit her face too roughly. Heaven and earth!
Must I remember? Why, she would hang on
him
As if increase of appetite had grown
By what it fed on; and yet, within a month—
Let me not think on't. Frailty, thy name is
woman!—
A little month, or ere those shoes were old
With which she followed my poor father's
body,
Like Niobe, all tears—why she, even she—
O God! a beast that wants discourse of reason
Would have mourn'd longer—married with my
uncle,
My father's brother; but no more like my
father
Than I to Hercules. Within a month,
Ere yet the salt of most unrighteous tears
Had left the flushing in her galled eyes,
She married. O, most wicked speed, to post
With such dexterity to incestuous sheets!
It is not, nor it cannot come to good.
But break, my heart, for I must hold my
tongue.
(I.2.129)

This is an exceptionally suggestive speech and the first of many which seem to invite Oedipal interpretations of the play. About these I do not propose to speak directly, except to remark that the source of Hamlet's so-called Oedipal anxiety is real and present, it is not an archaic and repressed fantasy. Hamlet does perhaps protest too much, in this soliloquy and elsewhere, about his father's superiority to his uncle (and to himself), and throughout the play he is clearly preoccupied with his mother's sexual appetite; but these ambivalences and preoccupations, whatever their unconscious roots, are elicited by a situation, palpable and external to him, in which they are acted out. The Oedipal configurations of Hamlet's predicament, in other words, inhabit the whole world of the play, they are not simply a function of his characterization, even though they resonate with it profoundly. There is every reason, in reality, for a son to be troubled and decomposed by the appetite of a mother who betrays his father's memory by her incestuous marriage, within a month, to his brother, and murderer, and there is surely more than reason for a son to be obsessed for a time with a father who literally returns from the grave to haunt him. But in any case, I think that at least early in the play, if not also later, such Oedipal echoes cannot be disentangled from Hamlet's grief, and Shakespeare's purpose in arousing them is not to call Hamlet's character to judgment, but to expand our understanding of the nature and intensity of his suffering. For all of these resonant events come upon Hamlet while he has still not even begun to assimilate the loss of a living father, while he is still freshly mourning, seemingly alone in Denmark, for the death of a King, and their major psychic impact and importance, I think, is that they protract and vastly dilate the process of his grief.

Freud called this process the work of mourning and described it in his essay, "Mourning and Melancholia," in a way which seems to me exceptionally germane to this play. Almost all of Freud's ideas can also be found in some form in the vast Renaissance literature on melancholy, but I think Freud's discussion best suggests the coherence they had in Shakespeare's imagination. The major preoccupation of the essay is, in fact, the
pathology of melancholy, or what we would now more commonly call depression, but in the course of his discussion Freud finds unusually suggestive analogies and distinctions between mourning and melancholy. He points out, to begin with, that except in one respect, the characteristics of normal grief and of pathological depression are the same, and that the two states can easily be confused—as they are, I think, endemically, in interpretations of Hamlet's character. "The distinguishing mental features of melancholia," Freud writes,

are a profoundly painful dejection, abrogation of interest in the outside world, loss of the capacity to love, inhibition of all activity, and a lowering of the self-regarding feelings to a degree that finds utterance in self-reproaches and self-reviling, and culminates in a delusional expectation of punishment. This picture becomes a little more intelligible when we consider that, with one exception, the same traits are met with in grief. The fall in self-esteem is absent in grief; but otherwise the features are the same. Profound mourning, the reaction to the loss of a loved person, contains the same feeling of pain, loss of interest in the outside world—in so far as it does not recall the dead one—loss of capacity to adopt any new object of love, which would mean a replacing of the one mourned, the same turning from every active effort that is not connected with thoughts of the dead. It is easy to see that this inhibition and circumscription in the ego is the expression of an exclusive devotion to its mourning, which leaves nothing over for other purposes or interests.

Freud remarks that "though grief involves grave departures from the normal attitude to life, it never occurs to us to regard it as a morbid condition and hand the mourner over to medical treatment. We rest assured that after a lapse of time it will be overcome, and we look upon any interference with it as inadvisable or even harmful."

The process by which grief is overcome, the work of mourning, Freud describes as a struggle—the struggle between the instinctive human disposition to remain libidinally bound to the dead person and the necessity to acknowledge the clear reality of his loss. "The task," Freud writes,

is now carried through bit by bit, under great expense of time and cathectic energy, while all the time the existence of the lost object is continued in the mind. Each single one of the memories and hopes which bound the libido to the object is brought up and hyper-cathected, and the detachment of the libido from it accomplished. Why this process of carrying out the behest of reality bit by bit, which is in the nature of a compromise, should be so extraordinarily painful is not at all easy to explain in terms of mental economics. It is worth noting that this pain seems natural to us. The fact is, however, that when the work of mourning is completed the ego becomes free and uninhibited again.

Freud's wonderment at the pain of grief must seem odd to most of us, and I think it may be a function of his general incapacity throughout his writing, including Beyond the Pleasure Principle, to deal adequately with death itself. The issue is important because it is related to an astonishing lapse in the argument of "Mourning and Melancholia," which is critical to an understanding of Hamlet, and which might have helped Freud himself account for the extraordinary pain of grief in terms of his own conception of mental economics. For what Freud leaves out in his consideration of mourning is its normal but enormously disturbing component of protest and anger—initially anger at being wounded and abandoned, but fundamentally a protest, both conscious and unconscious, against the inescapably mortal condition of human life.

Freud finds such anger in abundance in depression, and with his analysis of that state I would not presume to quarrel. The salient points of his argument are that in depression there is "an unconscious loss of a love-object, in contradistinction to mourning, in which there is nothing unconscious about the loss," and that there is a fall of self-esteem and a consistent cadence of self-reproach which is also not found in mourning. The key to an understanding of this condition, Freud continues, is the perception that the self-criticism of
depression is really anger turned inwards, "that the self-reproaches are reproaches against a loved object which have been shifted on to the patient's own ego." The "complaints" of depressed people, he remarks, "are really 'plaints' in the legal sense of the word … everything derogatory that they say of themselves relates at bottom to someone else. …" All the actions of a depressed person, Freud concludes, "proceed from an attitude of revolt, a mental constellation which by a certain process has become transformed into melancholic contrition."¹¹ Freud's explanation of the dynamics of this process is involved and technical, but there are two major points which emerge clearly and which are highly relevant to Hamlet. The first is that there is, in a depressed person, "an identification of the ego with the abandoned object." "The shadow of the object," he says, "falls upon the ego," so that the ego can "henceforth be criticized by a special mental faculty like an object, like the forsaken object. In this way the loss of the object becomes transformed into a loss in the ego. … "¹² The second point which Freud stresses is that because there is an ambivalent relation to the lost object to begin with, the regressive movement towards identification is also accompanied by a regressive movement towards sadism, a movement whose logical culmination is suicide, the killing in the self of the lost object with whom the depressed person has so thoroughly identified. Freud adds that in only one other situation in human life is the ego so overwhelmed by the object, and that is in the state of intense love.

With these analogies and distinctions in mind, let us now return to the opening scene at court. As I have already suggested, in his first speech to his mother, "Seems, madam! Nay, it is; I know not seems," Hamlet speaks from the very heart of grief of the supervening reality of his loss and of its inward wound, and I think the accent of normal, if intense, grief remains dominant in his subsequent soliloquy as well. It is true that in that soliloquy his mind turns to thoughts of "self-slaughter," but those thoughts notwithstanding, the emphasis of the speech is not one of self-reproach. It is not himself, but the uses of the world which Hamlet finds "weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable," and his mother's frailty suggests a rankness and grossness in nature itself. The "plaints" against his mother which occupy the majority of this speech are conscious and both his anger and ambivalence towards her fully justified. Even on the face of it, her hasty remarriage makes a mockery of his father's memory that intensifies the real pain and loneliness of his loss; and if he also feels his own ego threatened, and if there is a deeper cadence of grief in his words, it is because he is already beginning to sense that the shadow of a crime "with the primal eldest curse upon't" (III.3.37) has fallen upon him, a crime which is not delusional and not his, and which eventually inflicts a punishment upon him which tries his spirit and destroys his life. The last lines of Hamlet's soliloquy are:

> It is noet, nor it cannot come to good.  
> But break, my heart, for I must hold my tongue.

These lines show Hamlet's prescience, not his disease, and the instant he completes them, Horatio, Marcellus and Barnardo enter to tell him of the apparition of his dead father, the ghost which is haunting the kingdom and which has been a part of our own consciousness from the very outset of the play.

Hamlet's subsequent meeting with the ghost of his father is, it seems to me, both the structural and psychic nexus of the play. The scene is so familiar to us that the extraordinary nature of its impact on Hamlet can be overlooked, even in the theater. The whole scene deserves quotation, but I will concentrate upon only the last part of it. The scene begins with Hamlet expressing pity for the ghost and the ghost insisting that he attend to a more "serious" purpose:

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Ghost. List, list, O, list!  
If thou didst ever thy dear father love—
Ham. O God!  
Ghost. Revenge his foul and most unnatural murder.
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(I.5.22)
The ghost then confirms to Hamlet's prophetic soul that "The serpent that did sting thy father's life / Now wears his crown," and he proceeds to describe both Gertrude's remarriage and his own murder in his orchard in terms that seem deliberately to evoke echoes of the serpent in the garden of Eden. The ghost ends his recital saying:

O, horrible! O, horrible! most horrible!
If thou hast nature in thee, bear it not;
Let not the royal bed of Denmark be
A couch for luxury and damned incest.
But, howsoever thou pursuest this act,
Taint not thy mind, not let thy soul contrive
Against thy mother aught; leave her to
heaven,
And to those thorns that in her bosom lodge
To prick and sting her. Fare thee well at once.
The glowworm shows the matin to be near,
And gins to pale his uneffectual fire.
Adieu, adieu, adieu! Remember me. [Exit.]
(1.5.80)

Hamlet's answering speech, as the ghost exits, is profound, and it predicates the state of his mind and feeling until the beginning of the last act of the play:

O all you host of heaven! O earth! What else?
And shall I couple hell? O, fie! Hold, hold,
my heart;
And you, my sinews, grow not instant old,
But bear me stiffly up. Remember thee!
Ay, thou poor ghost, whiles memory holds a
seat
In this distracted globe. Remember thee!
Yea, from the table of my memory
I'll wipe away all trivial fond records,
All saws of books, all forms, all pressures past,
That youth and observation copied there,
And thy commandment all alone shall live
Within the book and volume of my brain,
Unmix'd with baser matter. Yes, by heaven!
O most pernicious woman!
O villain, villain, smiling, damned villain!
My tables—meet it is I set it down
That one may smile, and smile, and be a
villain;
At least I am sure it may be so in Denmark.
[Writing.]
So, uncle, there you are. Now to my word:
It is 'Adieu, adieu! Remember me'.
I have sworn't.
This is a crucial and dreadful vow for many reasons, but the most important, as I think Freud places us in a position to understand, is that the ghost's injunction to remember him, an injunction which Shakespeare's commitment to the whole force of the revenge genre never really permits either us or Hamlet to question, brutally intensifies Hamlet's mourning and makes him incorporate in its work what we would normally regard as the pathology of depression. For as we have seen, the essence of the work of mourning is the internal process by which the ego heals its wound, differentiates itself from the object, and slowly, bit by bit, cuts its libidinal ties with the one who has died. Yet this is precisely what the ghost forbids, and forbids, moreover, with a lack of sympathy for Hamlet's grief which is even more pronounced than the Queen's. He instead tells Hamlet that if ever he loved his father, he should remember him; he tells Hamlet of Gertrude's incestuous remarriage in a way which makes her desire, if not the libido itself, seem inseparable from murder and death; and finally he tells Hamlet to kill. Drawing upon and crystallizing the deepest energies of the revenge play genre, the ghost thus enjoins Hamlet to identify with him in his sorrow and to give murderous purpose to his anger. He consciously compels in Hamlet, in other words, the regressive movement towards identification and sadism which together usually constitute the unconscious dynamics of depression. It is only after this scene that Hamlet feels punished with what he later calls "a sore distraction" (V.2.222) and that he begins to reproach himself for his own nature and to meditate on suicide. The ghost, moreover, not only compels this process in Hamlet, like much of the world of the play, he incarnates it. The effect of his appearance and behest to Hamlet is to literalize Hamlet's subsequent movement toward the realm of death which he inhabits, and away from all of the libidinal ties which nourish life and make it desirable, away from "all trivial fond records, / All saws of books, all forms, all pressures past." As C. S. Lewis insisted long ago, the ghost leads Hamlet into a spiritual and psychic region which seems poised between the living and the dead. It is significant that Hamlet is subsequently described in images that suggest the ghost's countenance and significant too, as we shall see later, that Hamlet's own appearance and state of mind change, at the beginning of Act V, at the moment when it is possible to say that he has finally come to terms with the ghost and with his father's death and has completed the work of mourning.

I think Shakespeare intends us always to retain a sense of intensified mourning rather than of disease in Hamlet, partly because Hamlet is always conscious of the manic roles he plays and is always lucid with Horatio, but also because his thoughts and feelings turn outward as well as inward and his behavior is finally a symbiotic response to the actually diseased world of the play. And though that diseased world, poisoned at the root by a truly guilty King, eventually represents an overwhelming tangle of guilt, its main emphasis, both for Hamlet and for us, is the experience of grief. The essential focus of the action as well as the source of its consistent pulsations of feeling, the pulsations which continuously charge both Hamlet's sorrow and his anger (and in which the whole issue of delay is subsumed) is the actuality of conscious, not unconscious loss. For in addition to the death of his father in this play, Hamlet suffers the loss amounting to death of all those persons, except Horatio, whom he has most loved and who have most animated and given meaning to his life. He loses his mother, he loses Ophelia, and he loses his friends; and we can have no question that these losses are real and inescapable.

The loss of his mother is the most intense and the hardest to discuss. One should perhaps leave her to heaven as the ghost says, but even he cannot follow that advice. As I have already suggested, Hamlet is genuinely betrayed by her. She betrays him most directly, I think, by her lack of sympathy for him. She is clearly sexually drawn and loyal to her new husband, and she is said to live almost by Hamlet's looks, but she is essentially inert, oblivious to the whole realm of human experience through which her son travels. She seems not to care, and seems particularly not to care about his grief. Early in the play, when Claudius and others are in hectic search of the reason for Hamlet's melancholy, she says with bovine imperturb-ability, "I doubt it is no other but the main, / His father's death and our o'erhasty marriage" (II.2.56). That o'erhasty and incestuous marriage, of course, creates a reservoir of literally grievous anger in Hamlet. It suggests to him the impermanence upon which the Player King later insists, the impermanence of human affection as well as of life, and it also, less obviously, compels him to think of the violation of the union which gave him his own life and being. It is very difficult, in any circumstance, to think precisely upon our parents and their relationship.
without causing deep tremors in our selves, and for Hamlet the circumstances are extraordinary. In addition marriage itself has a sacramental meaning to him which has been largely lost to modern sensibility. Like the ghost, Hamlet always speaks reverently of the sanctity of marital vows, and the one occasion on which he mocks marriage is in fact an attack upon Claudius's presumption to have replaced his father. As he is leaving for England, Hamlet addresses Claudius and says, "Farewell, dear Mother." Claudius says, "Thy loving father, Hamlet," and Hamlet answers, "My mother: father and mother is man and wife; man and wife is one flesh; and so, my mother" (IV.3.49). Behind the Scriptural image in this ferocious attack upon Claudius, it seems to me, is both Hamlet's memory of his father's true marriage with his mother, a memory which has an almost pre-lapsarian resonance, and a visualization of the concupiscence through which his mother has defiled that sacrament and made Claudius's guilt a part of her own being. This same adulterated image of matrimony, I think, lies behind his intense reproaches both against himself and Ophelia in the speech in which he urges Ophelia to go to a nunnery:

Get thee to a nunnery. Why wouldst thou be a breeder of sinners? I am myself indifferent honest, but yet I could accuse me of such things that it were better my mother had not borne me: I am very proud, revengeful, ambitious; with more offences at my beck than I have thoughts to put them in, imagination to give them shape, or time to act them in. What should such fellows as I do crawling between earth and heaven?

(III.1.121)

Some of Hamlet's anger against Ophelia spills over, as it does in this speech, from his rage against his mother, but Ophelia herself gives him cause. I don't think there is any reason to doubt her own word, at the beginning of the play, that Hamlet has importuned her "with love / In honourable fashion … And hath given countenance to his speech … With almost all the holy vows of heaven" (I.3.110); and there is certainly no reason to question his own passionate declaration at the end of the play, over her grave, that he loved her deeply.

I loved Ophelia: forty thousand brothers
Could not, with all their quantity of love,
Make up my sum.

(V. 1.262)

Both Hamlet's grief and his task constrain him from realizing this love, but Ophelia's own behavior clearly intensifies his frustration and anguish. By keeping the worldly and disbelieving advice of her brother and father as "watchman" to her "heart" (I.3.46), she denies the heart's affection not only in Hamlet but in herself; and both denials add immeasurably to Hamlet's sense of loneliness and loss—and anger. Her rejection of him echoes his mother's inconstancy and denies him the possibility even of imagining the experience of loving and being loved by a woman at a time when he obviously needs such love most profoundly; and her rejection of her own heart reminds him of the evil court whose shadow, he accurately senses, has fallen upon her and directly threatens him. Most of Hamlet's speeches to Ophelia condense all of these feelings. They are spoken from a sense of suppressed as well as rejected love, for the ligaments between him and Ophelia are very deep in the play. It is she who first reports on his melancholy transformation, "with a look so piteous in purport / As if he had been loosed out of hell / To speak of horrors" (II. 1.82); it is she who remains most acutely conscious of the nobility of mind and form which has, she says, been "blasted with ecstasy" (III. 1.160); and it is she, after Hamlet has gone to England, who most painfully takes up his role and absorbs his grief to the point of real madness and suicide.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are less close to Hamlet's heart, and because they are such unequivocal sponges of the King, he can release his anger against them without any ambivalence, but at least initially they too amplify both his and our sense of the increasing emptiness of his world. We are so accustomed to treating
Rosencrantz and Guildenstern as vaguely comic twins that we can forget the great warmth with which Hamlet first welcomes them to Denmark and the urgency and openness of his plea for the continuation of their friendship. "I will not sort you with the rest of my servants," he tells them,

for, to speak to you like an honest man, I am most dreadfully attended. But, in the beaten way of friendship, what make you at Elsinore?

_Ros_. To visit you, my lord; no other occasion.

_Ham_. Beggar that I am, I am even poor in thanks; but I thank you; and sure, dear friends, my thanks are too dear a halfpenny. Were you not sent for? Is it you own inclining? Is it a free visitation? Come, come, deal justly with me. Come, come; nay, speak.

_Guil_. What should we say, my lord?

_Ham_. Why any thing. But to th' purpose: you were sent for; and there is a kind of confession in your looks, which your modesties have not craft enough to colour; I know the good King and Queen have sent for you.

_Ros_. To what end, my lord?

_Ham_. That you must teach me. But let me conjure you by the rights of our fellowship, by the consonancy of our youth, by the obligation of our ever-preserved love, and by what more dear a better proposer can charge you withal, be even and direct with me, whether you were sent for or no?

(II.2.266)

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, of course, cannot be direct with him, and Hamlet cuts his losses with them quite quickly and eventually quite savagely. But it is perhaps no accident that immediately following this exchange, when he must be fully realizing the extent to which, except for Horatio, he is now utterly alone in Denmark with his grief and his task, he gives that grief a voice which includes in its deep sadness and its sympathetic imagination a conspectus of Renaissance thought about the human condition. "I have of late," he tells his former friends,

—but wherefore I know not—lost all my mirth, forgone all custom of exercises; and indeed it goes so heavily with my disposition that this goodly frame, the earth, seems to me a sterile promontory; this most excellent canopy the air, look you, this brave o'erhanging firmament, this magestical roof fretted with golden fire—why, it appeareth no other thing to me than a foul and pestilent congregation of vapours. What a piece of work is man! How noble in reason! how infinite in faculties! in form and moving, how express and admirable! in action, how like an angel! in apprehension, how like a god! the beauty of the world! the paragon of animals! And yet, to me, what is this quintessence of dust?

(II.2.295)

"In grief," Freud remarks in "Mourning and Melancholia," "the world becomes poor and empty; in melancholia it is the ego itself."¹⁶ I think it should now be evident that during most of the action of _Hamlet_ we cannot make this distinction. For the first four acts of the play, the world in which Hamlet must exist and act is characterized in all its parts not merely as diseased, but specifically for Hamlet, as one which actually is being emptied of all the human relationships which nourish the ego and give it purpose and vitality. It is a
world which is essentially defined—generically, psychically, spiritually—by a ghost whose very countenance, "more in sorrow than in anger" (I.2.231), binds Hamlet to a course of grief which is deeper and wider than any in our literature. It is a world of mourning.

At the beginning of Act V, when Hamlet returns from England, that world seems to change, and Hamlet with it. Neither the countenance of the ghost nor his tormented and tormenting spirit seem any longer to be present in the play, and Hamlet begins to alter in state of mind as he already has in his dress. He stands in the graveyard which visually epitomizes the play's preoccupation with death, a scene which the clowns insistently associate with Adam's sin and Hamlet himself with Cain's, and he contemplates the "chap-fall'n" skull of the man who carried him on his back when he was a small child. His mood, like the scene, is essentially sombre, but though there is a suggestion by Horatio that he is still considering death "too curiously" (V. 1.200), there is no longer the sense that he and his world are conflated in the convulsive activity of grief. That activity seems to be drawing to a close, and his own sense of differentiation is decisively crystallized when, in a scene reminiscent of the one in which he reacts to the imitation of Hecuba's grief, he responds to Laertes's enactment of a grief which seems a parody of his own:

What is he whose grief
Bears such an emphasis, whose phrase of sorrow
Conjures the wand'ring stars, and makes them stand
Like wonder-wounded hearers. This is I,
Hamlet the Dane.

(V. 1.248)

It is an especially painful but inescapable paradox of Hamlet's tragedy that the final ending of his grief and the liberation of his self would be co-extensive with the apprehension of his own death. After agreeing to the duel with Laertes that he is confident of winning, he nevertheless tells Horatio, "But thou wouldst not think how ill all's here about my heart; but it is no matter" (V.2.203); and when Horatio urges him to postpone the duel, he says, in the famous speech which signifies, if it does not explain, the decisive change of his spirit:

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 owes of aught he leaves, what is't to leave betimes? Let be.

(V.2.211)

The theological import of these lines, with their luminous reference to Matthew, has long been recognized, but the particular emphasis upon death also suggests a psychological coordinate. For it seems to me that what makes Hamlet's acceptance of Providence finally intelligible and credible to us emotionally, what confirms the truth of it to our own experience, is our sense, as well as his, that the great anguish and struggle of his grief is over, and that he has completed the work of mourning. He speaks to Horatio quietly, almost serenely, with the unexultant calm which characterizes the end of the long, inner struggle of grief. He has looked at the face of death in his father's ghost, he has endured death and loss in all the human beings he has loved, and he now accepts those losses as an inevitable part of his own condition. He recognizes and accepts his own death. "The readiness is all" suggests the crystallization of his awareness of the larger dimension of time which has enveloped his tragedy from the start, including the revenge drama of Fortinbras's grievances on the outskirts of the action and that of the appalling griefs of Polonius's family deep inside it, but the line also most specifically states what is perhaps the last and most difficult task of mourning, his own readiness to die.
The ending of Hamlet's mourning is finally mysterious in the play, as the end of mourning usually is in actual life, but it is made at least partially explicable by the very transfusion of energy between him and the other characters that constitutes his grief to begin with. Early in the play he seems to absorb into himself the whole body of the world's sorrow and protest, as later in the play he seems to expel it. The ghost, I think, he partly exercises and partly incorporates. He increasingly gives expression to much of its vengeful anger—most definitively, perhaps, when he uses his father's signet to hoist Rosencrantz and Guildenstern on their own petar—but at the same time he thereby eventually frees himself to internalize the "radiance" of his father's memory rather than the ghost's shadow of it. His mother herself cannot really be transformed, but he makes her feel the force of his grief even if she cannot understand it, and in the closet scene at least, he succeeds in transferring some of the pain in his own heart to hers. To Claudius he transfers a good deal more. By means of the play within the play, including his own interpolated lines on mutability, Hamlet at once acts out the deep anger and sorrow of his grief and transmits the fever of their energy to the guilty King in whose blood he thereafter rages "like the hectic" (IV.3.66). But perhaps most important, not so much in effecting Hamlet's recovery as in representing its inner dynamics and persuading us of its authenticity, are the transformations which Ophelia and Laertes undergo during the period Hamlet himself is offstage on his voyage to England. Ophelia, as we have seen, drains off Hamlet's incipient madness and suicidal imaginings into her own "weeping brook" (IV.7.176) of grief, and she begins to do so precisely at the moment Hamlet leaves the stage for England. She enters "distracted" (IV.5.21), singing songs which signify not only the consuming pain of the loss of her own father but also the self-destructive sexual repression which has afflicted Hamlet as well as her. At almost the same moment, Laertes enters the stage, and while Hamlet himself later explicitly sees in Laertes's predicament an analogue of his own, Laertes's sorrow and anger are quickly corrupted; and his poisonous allegiance with the King simultaneously dramatizes the most destructive vengeful energies of grief and seems to draw those energies away from Hamlet and into himself. This whole movement of energy between Hamlet and the other characters suggests the symbiotic relation between the protagonist and the secondary characters in the medieval morality drama as well as the unconscious processes of condensation and displacement which are represented in dreams, and its result is our profound sense at the end of the play that Hamlet's self has been reconstituted as well as recovered. That sense is especially perspicuous in Act V in Hamlet's own entirely conscious and generous relation to Laertes, the double who threatens his life but not his identity, who presents an "image" of his "cause" (V.2.77), but never of the untainted heroic integrity of his grief.

Hamlet's generosity to Laertes at the end of the play is especially significant, I think, because it brings to the surface the underlying inflection of charity which makes Hamlet's whole experience of grief so humane and so remote from the moral or psychological pathology for which many critics, including Freud himself, indict him. In the only mention he makes of Hamlet in "Mourning and Melancholia," Freud remarks that the melancholiac often has access to exceptionally deep insights and that his self-criticism can come very near to self-knowledge; we only wonder why a man must become ill before he can discover truth of this kind. For there can be no doubt that whoever holds and expresses to others such an opinion of himself—one that Hamlet harboured of himself and all men—that man is ill, whether he speaks the truth or is more or less unfair to himself.

In a footnote Freud cites as evidence of Hamlet's misanthropy and sickness his criticism of Polonius: "Use every man after his desert, and who shall 'scape whipping?" (II.2.524). What Freud misses, of course, and it is to miss much, is not only that Hamlet becomes all men in his grief, but that he does so in the image of charity which this very line evokes. For the premise of Hamlet's statement, like Portia's in The Merchant of Venice, is "That in the course of justice none of us / Should see salvation," and that therefore "we do pray for mercy, / And that same prayer doth teach us all to render / The deeds of mercy" (IV.1.194). Hamlet's line, to be sure, does not have this explicit emphasis, but in its context there is no question that the motive of his statement is to have Polonius use the players kindly and that the ultimate burden of his thought is, like Portia's, the verse, "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." If the great anger and sorrow of
Hamlet's grief make his own experience of these trespasses tragically acute and painful, the same combination of feelings eventually expands his capacity to understand, if not forgive, them.

I think this generosity and integrity of grief lie close to the heart both of Hamlet's mystery and the play's. Hamlet is an immensely complicated tragedy, and anything one says about it leaves one haunted by what has not been said. But precisely in a play whose sug gestiveness has no end, it seems to me especially important to remember what actually happens. Hamlet himself is sometimes most preoccupied with delay, and with the whole attendant metaphysical issue of the relation between thought and action, but as his own experience shows, there is finally no action that can be commensurate with his grief, not even the killing of a guilty King, and it is Hamlet's experience of grief, and his recovery from it, to which we ourselves respond most deeply. He is a young man who comes home from his university to find his father dead and his mother remarried to his father's murderer. Subsequently the woman he loves rejects him, he is betrayed by his friends, and finally and most painfully, he is betrayed by a mother whose mutability seems to strike at the heart of human affection. In the midst of these waves of losses, which seem themselves to correspond to the spasms of grief, he is visited by the ghost of his father, who places upon him a proof of love and a task of vengeance which he cannot refuse without denying his own being. The ghost draws upon the emotional taproot of the revenge play genre and dilates the natural sorrow and anger of Hamlet's multiple griefs until they include all human frailty in their protest and sympathy and touch upon the deepest synapses of grief in our own lives, not only for those who have died, but for those, like ourselves, who are still alive.

Notes

1 All references to Shakespeare's texts are to Peter Alexander's edition (London, 1951).


3 I assume throughout this argument that Shakespeare essentially accepts and draws nourishment from the conventions of the revenge drama and that the ghost represents Hamlet's tragic predicament rather than a moral issue. Shakespeare clearly sophisticates Kyd's conception by conflating the ghost of Andrea and the figure of Revenge and by bringing the ghost directly into the world of the play and into Hamlet's consciousness; but there is never any question, either by Hamlet or by us, that Hamlet must eventually obey the ghost's injunction to take revenge. In later dramas like The Atheist's Tragedy and The Revenge of Bussy D'Ambois, the ghosts themselves remind the heroes that revenge belongs to God, but it is hardly an accident that those plays are neither tragic nor particularly compelling. The whole issue of the ethos of revenge in Hamlet is discussed quite decisively, it seems to me, by Helen Gardner in The Business of Criticism (Oxford, 1959), pp. 35-51.


5 Ed. Cairncross (Lincoln, Nebraska, 1967), IV.5.1.

6 Cairncross, III.2.1.

7 The definition of incest between a man and his brother's wife in the Elizabethan period was essentially a legal one—the relationship was prohibited by canon and civil law—but Claudius's actual murder of his brother suggests the deeper psychic implications of incest as well.

8For the most illuminating recent discussion of the literary treatment of melancholy in Renaissance England, see Bridget Gellert Lyons, Voices of Melancholy (New York, 1971). Lyons's analysis of Hamlet's melancholy (pp. 77-112) is especially rich, and I found it suggestive for my own argument, though my emphasis and method are different from hers. The relevance of modern psychoanalytic ideas of mourning to Hamlet is


10 Rivière's translation, p. 166.

11 Rivière's translation, pp. 166, 169-70.

12 Rivière's translation, p. 170.


14 See Lyons, p. 81.

15 What to ourselves in passion we propose,
The passion ending, doth the purpose lose.
The violence of either grief or joy
Their own enactures with themselves destroy.
Where joy most revels grief doth most lament;
Grief joys, joy grieves, on slender accident.
This world is not for aye. …

(III.2.189)

16 Rivière's translation, p. 167.


18 borrow this formulation, which describes a reversal of the process of identification in depression, from Karl Abraham, who does not himself apply it to Hamlet. In common with many more recent psychoanalytic writers, Abraham argues that an essential part of the resolution of grief consists of an unambivalent and beneficent introjection of the loved person into the mourner's own psyche to compensate for the continuing, conscious sense of loss. See his *Selected Papers*, ed. Ernest Jones (London, 1949), pp. 442 and 438.

19 The therapeutic value of this kind of aggressive transference was accentuated and made quite explicit by Marston in *The Malcontent*; see Lyons, pp. 96-97.

20 Rivière's translation, pp. 167-68.

**Anna K. Nardo (essay date 1983)**


*In the following essay, Nardo notes the pervasiveness in Hamlet of the double-bind, a paradoxical situation that forces its victim to choose between impossible alternatives, and identifies it as the organizing principle of the play.*
Alone in his private chapel, Claudius feels impelled by his guilt to pray. But, he laments,

Pray can I not,
Though inclination be as sharp as will:
My stronger guilt defeats my strong intent;
And, like a man to double business bound,
I stand in pause where I shall first begin,
And both neglect.¹

Like so many passages in Shakespeare's most ambiguous play, Claudius' words apply less to himself than to Hamlet. In self-pity Claudius feels like a victim of a double bind. In reality he has a clear moral choice: to renounce "crown … ambition and … queen" and be freed to pray for forgiveness, or to keep "those effects for which [he] did the murder" and live with his guilt. He lacks the courage to choose and tries unsuccessfully to have it both ways, kneeling and hoping lamely that "All may be well." Hamlet, however, is a true victim of double binds. Thrust into a familial situation remarkably similar in its patterns of interaction to those of families which produce mad children, he is confronted with contradictory demands from which he cannot escape. Recent research by psychologists who have refined the double-bind theory since its first publication in 1956 makes it possible to define with some precision how both Hamlet and Ophelia are placed in double-bind situations and how their struggles to escape result in tragedy.²

I

Most previous psychological studies of Hamlet have been based on Freud's opinion that Hamlet represents a classic case of Oedipal conflict. Ernest Jones assumes that, like all male children, Hamlet must have experienced jealousy of his father's claim on his mother's love. As Jones reads the play, Hamlet's un-acceptable rage and his desire to murder his father were repressed until Claudius performed the very act he fantasized as a child: killing his father and marrying his mother. Claudius' deed reactivates Hamlet's repressed fantasies and renders him incapable of avenging his father's murder; to kill Claudius, Hamlet must kill himself, whose desires are no less vicious than Claudius' acts. Avi Erlich agrees that Hamlet suffers from the Oedipal dilemma, but he finds the source of Hamlet's tragedy not in his repressed desire to murder his father, but rather in his fruitless search throughout the play for a strong father figure. Hamlet needs a symbolic father powerful enough to stifle his son's Oedipal longings—one who could have prevented or who will now avenge the deceased king's victimization by a murderous brother and a castrating wife.³

Other psychoanalytic critics have contributed analyses of Hamlet's society. Theodore Lidz has focused on the interactions among members of the two central families in the play. Placing Hamlet at the center of inter-locking triangles of conflict, Lidz details Hamlet's predicament as the rival of two fathers for his mother's love, as an intruder into a stifling father-daughter bond, and as the opponent of his beloved's brother.⁴ Using Erik Erikson's theories about the stages of human development, Neil Friedman and Richard Jones have located Hamlet, despite his age, in late adolescence, the period in which one searches for a stable identity. In order to achieve fidelity to a central self, an adolescent needs people and ideas he can trust. But since Hamlet's world is a morass of infidelity and duplicity, he cannot attain a stable sense of self; instead he becomes a consummate actor, constantly shifting roles and never establishing a coherent identity capable of decision and action. David Leverenz has described the specific nature of Hamlet's duplicity, pointing out a number of "mixed signals" given to both Hamlet and Ophelia which result in "knots" (R. D. Laing's term) of contradiction that "separate role from self, reason from feeling, duty from love."⁵

All these revisions of the Freudian view have followed modern trends in psychoanalytic thought, emphasizing interpersonal and social interaction and de-emphasizing the intrapsychic focus. Freud's, Jones's and Erlich's Hamlet is a static portrait of a doomed man's anguish, whereas Erikson's, Lidz's, and Leverenz's Hamlet is a dynamic drama about a man's conflictual relationships within a broad social context.

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One weakness of theories based on the Oedipal dilemma is that they must be based, in part, on speculations about matters the text does not mention, such as what Hamlet as a young child felt about his father. Such theories also lack precision in differentiating Hamlet's feigning from true madness. Nor do they account for his return from the sea voyage as a changed man. Finally, like many psychoanalytic studies of literature, such theories either ignore the language of the play or treat it as the manifest content of a dream to be decoded. Approaching Hamlet from the perspective of the double-bind theory avoids the pitfalls of reading beyond the text. And because the theory analyzes the nuances of social interaction in great detail, it necessitates close attention to the puns, paradoxes, and riddles in the witty verbal exchanges, and may even illuminate the perennial enigmas about how mad Hamlet is and what caused his sea change.

II

Psychologists who have tried to define the double bind have discovered the truth behind Polonius' verbiage: "for, to define true madness, / What is't but to be nothing else but mad?" (II.ii.93-94). Their efforts over the past twenty years have produced a term used to describe a pattern of communication often found in families with a schizophrenic adolescent or young adult. The pattern occurs

1. When the individual is involved in an intense relationship; that is, a relationship in which he feels it is vitally important that he discriminate accurately what sort of message is being communicated so that he may respond appropriately.
2. And, the individual is caught in a situation in which the other person in the relationship is expressing two orders of message and one of these denies the other.
3. And, the individual is unable to comment on the messages being expressed to correct his discrimination of what order of message to respond to, i.e., he cannot make a metacommunicative statement.

The double bind resembles the kind of paradox epitomized in the classic anecdote about Epimenides the Cretan, who claimed "All Cretans are liars." Because the verbal message ("All Cretans are liars") invalidates the broader message conveyed by the situational context (the fact that a Cretan says "All Cretans are liars"), the statement can only be true if it is false. The kind of endless vacillation generated by such a message resembles the plight of someone ensnared in a double bind.

Unfortunately, in human behavior double binds are seldom as clear or as identifiable as verbal paradoxes, because they arise out of a total context of communication in a relationship over a long period of time and cannot readily be understood outside the relationship. The following example is often given to illustrate the double bind:

A young man who had fairly well recovered from an acute schizophrenic episode was visited in the hospital by his mother. He was glad to see her and impulsively put his arm around her shoulders, whereupon she stiffened. He withdrew his arm and she asked, "Don't you love me any more?" He then blushed, and she said, "Dear, you must not be so easily embarrassed and afraid of your feelings." The patient was able to stay with her only a few minutes more and following her departure he assaulted an aide and was put in the tubs.

Here, while rejecting her son on the level of body communication, the mother demands affection on the level of verbal communication. Drawing tight the knot of the double bind, she makes it impossible for her son to perceive the contradiction; she blames him for being afraid and embarrassed at displays of feeling, but clearly she cannot accept such displays. The son is trapped: if he wants to keep his tie to his mother, he must not show her that he loves her, but if he does not show her that he loves her, then he will lose her. In families where double-bind patterns of communication predominate, escape from the field is blocked either by the individuals' mutual dependency or by a specific prohibition.
Originally, the double-bind theory was formulated to explain the genesis of schizophrenia as a pattern of irrational perception and behavior learned by a child in his family. According to the theory, a family entangled in these paradoxical modes of communication may maintain a relative status quo until maturational and social pressures compel a vulnerable child to separate from the family. Typically, the attempted separation produces a schizophrenic episode in the child. There are only two ways for such a child to untie a double bind: (1) recognizing the incongruity of the two messages, or (2) giving a double message in reply. But not even these always forestall madness. Gregory Bateson, one of the originators of the double-bind theory, has noted that "The psychotic patient may make astute, pithy, often metaphorical remarks that reveal an insight into the forces binding him. Contrariwise, he may become rather expert in setting double bind situations himself."

Hamlet does both.

III

Hamlet opens in darkness and confusion with "Who's there?" It employs question, doubt, and irony as its most common rhetorical modes. And it involves almost everyone in duplicity. One is thus not surprised to find its characters in double-bind situations. Although unaware of the double-bind theory, many previous literary critics have described Hamlet's paradoxes in ways that are consonant with it: Maynard Mack and Harry Levin see Hamlet's world as cast in an interrogative or ironic mood; John Lawlor, Norman Rabkin, Nicholas Brooke, Nigel Alexander, and Bernard McElroy articulate the irreconcilable oppositions in roles, choices, and even world views that structure the play at every level; and Paul Jorgensen, Maurice Charney, and Lawrence Danson analyze the verbal mystification that blankets Elsinore with such a fog of lies, flattery, preciosity, puns, and feigning that words become whores.

From the moment when we first see Hamlet, his black clothes implicitly rebuking the mirthful court's disrespect for his dead father, he is evading traps set by Claudius. With hypocritical oxymorons ("mirth in funeral … dirge in marriage") and pointed reminders to the courtiers that they approved his hasty marriage to his brother's widow, the King delivers an unctuous speech commencing a public ritual in which all must legitimize his dubious act by their tacit assent. Because Hamlet nonverbally refuses to participate, Claudius tries to force either public sanction of the marriage and his kingship, regardless of Hamlet's personal feelings, or public opposition, in which case Claudius could remove him in the interest of national security. When Claudius asks metaphorically why his stepson is still in mourning, Hamlet correctly perceives the real message and translates "How is it that the clouds still hang on you?" (I.ii.66) as "Sanction my marriage to your mother by dressing appropriately." He evades the trap by declining to respond to either the explicit or the implicit message. Instead, he pretends to take Claudius' cloud metaphor literally and answers with a punning riddle—"Not so, my lord; I am too much in the sun" (I.ii.67)—that could mean any of several things: too much out of doors, too much in the sun of Claudius' favor, too much of a son to Claudius. This first exchange firmly establishes Hamlet's remarkable skill at recognizing and manipulating levels of communication. By shifting to the literal level, he does more than evade Claudius' trap; he delivers a multiple insult which epitomizes his anger and opposition to his stepfather, but which Claudius cannot answer. Like his mourning clothes, Hamlet's puns allow him tacitly to oppose Claudius' regime without fear of retribution and without betraying "that within which passeth show" to hypocritical "seems" (I.ii.76-86).

IV

Ironically, not the crafty Claudius but the weak-willed and naive Gertrude succeeds in trapping Hamlet in a double bind. Neither the veiled threats in the insulting terms the King uses to describe Hamlet's grief ("obstinate condolement … impious stubborness … unmanly grief … "), nor the bribe of being "most immediate to [the] throne" impels Hamlet to stay in Elsinore, "in the cheer and comfort" of Claudius' watchful eye (I.ii.87-117). Hamlet assents only to his mother's modest plea, which, in the context of their whole relationship, is anything but simple.
When his father died—a father he idealized as "Hyperion"—his mother, instead of leaning on her son for comfort, rejected him by immediately remarrying. Making the rejection even more painful, she chose her husband's brother—a "satyr" by comparison to Hamlet's father. These actions have given her son an unequivocal message: "I am not an asexual madonna, but a carnal woman with desires you cannot fulfill. You must separate yourself from me emotionally and make your own life." If matters had rested here, Hamlet might have been disillusioned, but he would not necessarily have been trapped; he might have returned to Wittenberg and resumed his studies. But now Gertrude delivers a verbal message in contradiction to the message conveyed by her behavior: "Let not thy mother lose her prayers, Hamlet: / I pray thee; stay with us" (I.ii. 118-19). In the total context of the court scene, where her husband has staged a public ceremony of assent to his sinful marriage and his new regime, she asks for much more: "Love me, condone my incest and rejection of your father's memory, and treat this man, whom you seem to despise, as a loving father." Her plea that Hamlet stay in Elsinore, markedly contrasting with the leave granted Laertes, is the demand that closes the trap, because it blocks any escape from the contradiction in her messages.

Eluding Claudius' ploys only to fall into a double bind imposed by his mother, Hamlet reveals in his first soliloquy just how trapped he feels. His intense disillusionment with Gertrude breaks out in a tirade against her hypocritical tears, her sensuality, and the "weary, stale, flat and unprofitable … uses of this world" (I.ii. 133-34). But the son's love for his mother surfaces, albeit fleetingly, in the vignette he paints of the love between Gertrude and the father he emulates:

So excellent a king …
  … so loving to my mother
That he might not beem the winds of heaven
Visit her face too roughly …
  … why, she would hang on him,
As if increase of appetite had grown
By what it fed on.

(I.ii. 139-45)

Poignantly, his final words reveal both his love and his trap. He cries "But break, my heart" because, despite his disgust, his heart yields to his mother when he promises to obey her wishes. But he must contain his swelling anger and grief: "I must hold my tongue" (I.ii. 159). He cannot leave; he cannot love his mother and accept her husband; he cannot openly condemn her and Claudius; and he cannot, and be true to himself, lie. The only escape he sees is "self-slaughter," against which "the Everlasting … [has] fix'd / His canon" (I.ii. 131-32). He is bound.

To make matters worse, Hamlet is now confronted by a second and even more constricting double bind, this one imposed by the Ghost, who speaks in the name of the father Hamlet loves, not by the duplicitous stepfather who sets snares for him. The Ghost tells Hamlet a story that is even more shocking than the forbidden secrets of his prison house, a story to
By calling Claudius "that adulterate beast," the Ghost suggests that Gertrude herself is an adulteress, a woman who has forsaken the celestial bed of the elder Hamlet and now preys on garbage. By cursing Claudius' "traitorous gifts" to her, the Ghost implies that Gertrude is a whore. Without clarifying whether or not Gertrude was party to the murder, the Ghost describes the circumstances of the elder Hamlet's death in gruesome detail. Into his ear, Claudius poured a "leperous distilment," whose "sudden vigour … doth posset / And curd, like eager droppings into milk, / The thin and wholesome blood," covering his body "Most lazar like, with vile and loathsome crust" and sending his soul to torments so horrible that he must leave it to Hamlet's overwrought imagination to picture them (I.v.59-80). After this bloodcurdling tale, the Ghost delivers a multiple command to Hamlet:

Let not the royal bed of Denmark be
A couch for luxury and damned incest.
But, howsoever thou pursues this act,
Taint not thy mind, nor let thy soul contrive
Against thy mother aught: leave her to heaven.

(I.v.82-86)

As critics have often noted, the Ghost demands the impossible. His complex injunction is actually two sets of contradictory demands: "Avenge my murder and your mother's incest," and "Neither allow your character to become depraved, nor punish your mother." If Hamlet believes the Ghost's horrific story and becomes a bloody avenger, he cannot avoid taint. The corruption in his own family that he has been forced to contemplate so graphically will have already tainted his mind; and his deed will entail defying the Christian prohibition against vengeance and embracing the pagan code of retribution. Furthermore, to avenge the crimes against his father, Hamlet must punish Gertrude—if not directly, at least indirectly, by exposing to the nation the fact that she has married her husband's murderer, whether or not she was privy to the murder itself. If Gertrude remains unscathed, however, Hamlet will not have completely dealt with the one sin we know her to be guilty of, namely incest, which she has knowingly committed. Hamlet is again trapped in a double bind. His love and respect for his father, his awe before a ghost who has returned from the grave to reveal a buried truth, and the terror of the night make escape from the contradictory commands impossible. To the Ghost's surperfluous parting words, "remember me," Hamlet answers, "O all you host of heaven! O earth! what else?" (I.v.91-92).

VI

The only escape from a double bind is either to recognize and label the incongruity of the messages or to respond with a double message in turn. Lacking any emotional ties to Claudius that might blind him to the duplicity of his stepfather's words, Hamlet slips through the King's nets by answering in double and triple puns. But his love for his mother and his deceased father renders the usually quick-witted Prince unable to recognize their doubleness; and because he cannot articulate the contradiction, the strain of their demands almost breaks him. Before announcing his plan to assume an "antic disposition," he seems on the brink of madness: he makes tautological jokes ("There's ne'er a villain dwelling in all Denmark / But he's an arrant knave"), mouths chitchat which Horatio dismisses as "wild and whirling words," and turns the horror of following the Ghost's subterranean voice around the battlements into macabre comedy by calling his tormented father's spirit "truepenny," "this fellow in the cellarage," "old mole," and "worthy pioneer" (I.v.118-81). But Hamlet is not driven mad by the double binds he faces, because he plays mad instead.

By its very nature, play is double, and therefore a possible response to a double bind. When a monkey playfully bites another monkey, the bite conveys the message, "This bite does not signify what a bite normally signifies." The bite is obviously still a bite, but it is not really a bite, because play creates a context in which actions both are and are not real, both are and are not serious. Players of poker and chess, spectators of
football and tragedy, prizefighters and stamp collectors are all intensely serious, but they can also dismiss their acts as "just play," as somehow set apart from everyday reality. According to the philosopher Eugen Fink, "We play in the so-called real world, but while playing there emerges an enigmatic realm that is not nothing, and yet is nothing real. … The play-world is not suspended in a purely ideal world. It always has a real setting, and yet it is never a real thing among other real things, although it has an absolute need of real things as a point of departure." This paradoxical quality is particularly evident in the higher forms of play, such as drama or ballet. As Johan Huizinga, Gregory Bateson, and other play theorists have marveled, Falstaff is "not nothing," but he is "nothing real," and the ballerina who dances in Swan Lake both is and is not a swan.

Hamlet knows a great deal about play. He loves drama, heartily rejoices at the arrival of the players despite having "lost all [his] mirth" (II.ii.307), begs a speech on the spot (which he half recites), and instructs them wisely in their trade. In the tears of the actor who recounts the misery of Hecuba, he is struck by what every playgoer knows but often takes for granted: how

this player here,
But in a fiction, in a dream of passion,
Could force his soul to his own conceit
That from her working all his visage wann'd,
Tears in his eyes, distraction in's aspect,
A broken voice, and his whole function
suiting
With forms to his conceit? and all for
nothing!
For Hecuba!
What's Hecuba to him, or he to Hecuba,
That he should weep for her?

(II.ii.577-86)

The paradox of play, its way of transcending the rigid distinction between reality and illusion, allows the player to be present at the fall of Troy while simultaneously displaying the skills of his trade thousands of years later in a land far to the north of the Mediterranean.

Because of the inherent doubleness of play, when Hamlet's sanity is threatened by maddening double binds he can play mad and therefore in some sense both be and not be mad. Playing the role of madman allows him, moreover, an even greater freedom to play: to play with words, to play with people's ignorance, to play the part of chorus in "The Murder of Gonzago," to play with others' feelings for him. Since not only Claudius but also his henchmen Polonius, Rosencrantz, and Guildenstern, with Ophelia and Gertrude as dupes, all bait traps for Hamlet everywhere, he desperately needs the freedom available in play. When his school-fellows chide him for offending Claudius with "The Murder of Gonzago" and reject his riddling response with "Good my lord, put your discourse into some frame" (III.ii.320), they suggest why Hamlet must play. If he provides stable contexts, reliable frames, for his words and actions, his pursuers may succeed in pinning him down. But because all his messages are within the paradoxical frame of play, and can, therefore, be taken as true and not true, serious and "just play" simultaneously, no one will be able to "pluck out the heart of [his] mystery"—a term that alludes both to Hamlet's enigmatic ways and to his trade as a player par excellence.

VII

Playing is also how Hamlet attempts, albeit futilely, to escape from the Ghost's double bind, a trap so devastating that it precipitates the tragedy. When confronted with the impossible demand to avenge the murder and incest without tainting his mind or punishing his mother, Hamlet gives, by his actions, a double
response: he plays at being an avenger. Under the cloak of madness, he requites his father's murder precisely—by pouring poison into the ears not only of the poisoner himself but of all who are guilty by association with his regime. With biting sarcasm, salacious puns, brutal satire, and diseased imagery, he assaults his enemies without actually performing the act of vengeance. Netted around with the intrigues of Claudius and company, and the double binds imposed by his parents, Hamlet plays for both his life and his sanity.

Playing the madman for the benefit of the court, and playing the avenger out of his own need to obey his father, Hamlet gleefully takes every opportunity to attack Claudius by exposing his minion, Polonius, as an old fool with "eyes purging thick amber and plumi-tree gum" and "most weak hams" (II.ii. 198-202). Hamlet says that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern would "play upon me; you would seem to know my stops ... you would sound me from my lowest note to the top of my compass" (III.ii.380-83); but it is actually Hamlet who plays them, and as skillfully as a musician plays a recorder. After barely five minutes of greetings and conversation, he has them confessing themselves Claudius' spies. Still, these sallies of wit against unworthy opponents are only practice thrusts to prepare him for the duel with Claudius himself—a duel which is, however, "just play."

After being struck by the power of drama in the player's passion for Hecuba, Hamlet formulates his plan: "the play's the thing / Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king" (II.ii.633-34). "The play's the thing" in at least two senses. First, Hamlet uses the play to play avenger by tormenting Claudius with the knowledge that Hamlet knows all the details of the crime. He even threatens Claudius with death: the King's own nephew boldly informs the audience that the murderer, Lucianus, is the player-king's nephew. Second, Hamlet uses the play to do what he believes the player, who was so moved by the illusory Hecuba, would do if he had Hamlet's real "cue for passion":

Make mad the guilty and appal the free,  
Confound the ignorant, and amaze indeed  
The very faculties of eyes and ears.  
(II.ii.590-92)

He prepares to madden Claudius and shock the court by mixing art with life.

VIII

During the time intervening between the Ghost's appearance and the players' arrival, Hamlet has been coping with the double bind imposed by the Ghost. His efforts have been restricted to playing mad and playing avenger; he has now discovered another escape route as well. If the Ghost is not in fact his father's spirit, but a devil tempting Hamlet to perdition, as he fears, or to madness and suicide, as Horatio originally feared, then Hamlet is freed from its contradictory demands. To determine the truth, he stages an illusion to test Claudius and the Ghost. If the Ghost's tale, the matter of the play, proves true, then Hamlet will feel bound by the Ghost's impossible commands, which he will assume to be his father's. In the meantime, the play itself will become part of the vengeance the Ghost requires. Like the patient whose years of receiving incongruent messages have made him expert at setting double binds for others, Hamlet imposes on Claudius a double bind that will torment him for his sins. The son thus repays the uncle equal measure for confining the father "to fast in fires" for his "foul crimes" (I.v. 11-12).

When asked the play's title, Hamlet answers, "The Mouse-trap. Marry, how? Trapically," with a pun on "tropically" (III.ii.247). The humor of the pun conceals the truth that the play is both a trope, a figurative expression, and a trap. Indeed, Hamlet can turn the play into a trap precisely because it is a trope. Drama is a kind of figurative expression, a metaphorical rendering of life, in which the players, as Hamlet says, "hold ... the mirror up to nature" (III.ii.26). And drama, like other tropes, is inherently double. Just as Falstaff both is
and is not real, the poet's lady both is and is not a red, red rose. While watching a play, an audience can allow its deepest emotions to be aroused because they can be safely contained in the context, "This is only a play, a metaphor for life and not life itself." Paradoxically, viewers are moved to real emotions precisely because the play itself is not really real. Except for Don Quixote, driven mad by reading chivalric romances, the passions aroused by poetic or dramatic illusion do not ordinarily threaten the everyday world. If they do, the audience withdraws its un-defended emotional involvement, for life has usurped art.25

When Claudius comes to "The Murder of Gonzago," he expects to enjoy a trope, a kind of entertaining and innocent duplicity. Instead he finds a trap. By inviting Claudius to a play, Hamlet conveys the message, "This is fiction, a harmless diversion." He tries to sustain this message as long as possible by dismissing Claudius' suspicions after the opening scene with "No, no, they do but jest, poison in jest; no offense i' the world" (III.ii.244-45). That Claudius approaches the play in this context is clear from his pleasure and relief when he learns that Hamlet is amusing himself with the players. The King will attend the dramatic soiree, he tells Rosencrantz and Guildenstern,

> With all my heart; and it doth much content me To hear [Hamlet] so inclin'd. Good gentlemen, give him a further edge, And drive his purpose into these delights. (III.i.25-28)

But when Claudius sees and hears the details of his own crime portrayed on stage and narrated by Hamlet's choral asides, he receives another order of message that violently contradicts the first: "This is the truth and a threat to your life." The incongruity of the two messages is so shocking that it cracks the deceitful mask Claudius has successfully worn since the murder.

Although no soliloquy reveals his thoughts at the moment he rises, calls for light, and summarily dismisses the festive gathering, surely we are led to infer that Claudius is perplexed in the extreme. How on earth could Hamlet be aware of the details of a murder known only to the murderer and the victim? And if Hamlet does not know these details, how could a fiction possibly portray the exact truth? Having no ties of emotional dependency to Hamlet, Claudius can and does physically escape from the field. But he is bound nevertheless, because his flight acknowledges that he has been, at least momentarily, maddened by the paradox of a true illusion. And his madness reveals his guilt. By recognizing and manipulating the doubleness of drama—so that "The Murder of Gonzago" is not, like most plays, both true and not true, but true and true—Hamlet has cunningly prepared a double bind to "Make mad the guilty."

IX

Unfortunately, he helps make mad the innocent as well. In his callous treatment of Ophelia, Hamlet adds to the double binds that drive her not momentarily mad, like Claudius, nor playfully mad, like himself, but mad indeed. If the view of Polonius' family presented in Acts I and II is representative, Ophelia has been reared in a very confusing atmosphere. Her father always "With windlasses and with assays of bias, / By indirections find[s] directions out" (II.i.65-66). Nor does he see any contradiction in outlining the tactical deceptions that produce worldly success (such as "Give thy thoughts no tongue" and "the apparel oft proclaims the man") in the same breath with the counsel,

> This above all: to thine own self be true, And it must follow, as the night the day, Thou canst not then be false to any man. (I.iii.59-80)
With his spying, his love of policy, and his propensity, he admits, "To cast beyond ourselves in our opinions" (II.i. 115), Polonius ensnares his own daughter in double binds.

While warning her to beware of Hamlet's "tenders / Of ... affection," he chides,

think yourself a baby;
That you have ta'en these tenders for true pay,
Which are not sterling. Tender yourself more
dearly;
Or ... you'll tender me a fool.

(I.iii. 105-9)

Here and throughout this scene, he delivers contradictory messages to Ophelia: (1) you are a baby, an innocent, whose virginity must remain undefiled, and therefore you must reject Hamlet's attentions; (2) you are capable of having a baby ("you'll tender me a fool"), of attracting a 30-year-old heir apparent, and perhaps of winning a queenship if you "Tender yourself more dearly" and "Set your entreatments at a higher rate I Than a command to parley" (I.iii.107, 122-23). In his repeated imagery of buying and selling, and in his later willingness to use his daughter as bait to catch Hamlet, Polonius becomes in truth what Hamlet calls him in jest—"a fishmonger," a bawd. His language and actions implicitly convey to Ophelia the message that she should be a whore, while at the same time he explicitly warns her to remain pure. She cannot comment ment on the incongruity of her father's messages because, despite the glimmer of perceptiveness she shows in teasing Laertes about following his own advice, her father and brother have usurped her right to think. When Polonius scornfully asks if she believes Hamlet's professions of love, she meekly murmurs, "I do not know, my lord, what I should think" (I.iii.104). So Polonius immediately tells her what to think. Finally, unlike her brother, who leaves for France, Ophelia cannot escape from the field. In her world daughters must obey fathers, even if—like Jephthah, to whom Hamlet compares Polonius—the fathers choose to sacrifice the daughters.

Under different circumstances, a marriage to Hamlet might have freed Ophelia from the prison of being her father's puppet. But like a dutiful daughter, she rejects her potential rescuer and allows herself to be used by his enemies. Consequently, she confirms Hamlet's harsh judgment: "Frailty, thy name is woman!" (I.ii.146). After concluding that Ophelia has betrayed him to the spies behind the arras, Hamlet deliberately sets psychological traps for her. Arousing her tender feelings by confessing "I did love you once" (III.i.115), he then scorns her bitterly as false and lewd. Because, like all women, she will deceive men with her "paintings" and will surely cuckold her future husband, he banishes her to a "nunnery"—whether he means a convent where she will not "be a breeder of sinners" (III.i.123) or a whorehouse where she can continue the trade taught her by her father. In this pun he telescopes the double messages which assault her: she must be both a virgin and a whore.

Later at "The Murder of Gonzago," Hamlet's traps for Ophelia become more vicious. In the following exchange, he flirts with her in bawdy language, then condemns her for having salacious thoughts:

Hamlet: Lady, shall I lie in your lap?
[Lying down at Ophelia's feet.]
Ophelia: No, my lord.
Hamlet: I mean, my head upon your lap?
Ophelia: Ay, my lord.
Hamlet: Do you think I meant country matters?
Ophelia: I think nothing, my lord.
Hamlet: That's a fair thought to lie between
maids' legs.
Ophelia: What is, my lord?
Hamlet: Nothing.

(III.ii. 118-28)

After she chastely rejects his initial lewd request, Hamlet ridicules her for mistaking his supposedly innocent question for ribaldry. If she had not understood his remark and had answered "Yes," he could have embarrassed her by treating her reply as a sexual proposition. She will be punished regardless of her answer, and she is punished for understanding his meaning. When she tries to escape from the dilemma by refusing to understand ("I think nothing, my lord"), he makes even her retreat an insulting sexual innuendo: "thing" and "nothing" often refer to the genitalia that 'lie between maids' legs." Throughout "The Murder of Gonzago," Hamlet both acts madly to divert the court spies from his real endeavor and vents his anxiety over the plan to test Claudius and the Ghost by using Ophelia, whom he now considers a traitoress, as the unwilling straight man in his comedy routine. Although the game he pursues is Claudius, the results for Ophelia are jarring double messages, in which his bawdry simultaneously arouses and damns her nascent sexuality. Her pitiful attempts to laugh away his cruel jests reveal her confusion. Both her father and her former lover have prepared her for madness by demanding that she be virginal while treating her like a whore, and by discouraging her from thinking for herself, in which case she might perceive the incongruity of their demands.

X

The vehemence of Hamlet's assault on Ophelia indicates that his interim solutions to the double bind he faces have failed. Playing mad to preserve his sanity, playing avenger to satisfy his obligation to avenge his father's murder, and directing a play to test the Ghost and punish Claudius have not fulfilled his father's three impossible demands. Despite his exultation over the success of "The Mousetrap," which, he brags, will "get me a fellowship in a cry of players" (III.ii.288-89)—when he comes upon his enemy alone and defenseless in the chapel, he shirks the command to avenge (in earnest, not play)—the murder and incest. In the next scene, he kills the wrong man instead. In his longing for death, in his insulting treatment of Ophelia, and in the foul imagery he uses to condemn his mother's lust, Hamlet reveals that his thoughts have become as "rank and gross" as the "unweeded garden" of the world around him, despite the Ghost's injunction to taint not his mind. Furthermore, he does punish Gertrude. Answering the summons to her closet, he physically restrains her; he makes her call out in fear lest he become a matricide like Nero, whose soul he must consciously expel from his bosom; he forces her to compare her two husbands; and he appalls her with the filthiness of her sin:

Nay, but to live
In the rank sweat of an enseamed bed,
Stew'd in corruption, honeying and making love
Over the nasty sty.

(III.iv.91-94)

Instead of leaving her to heaven, he pours these poisonous words that feel like daggers into her ears until she begs, "No more, sweet Hamlet!" Emphasizing what this and the two previous scenes have clearly shown—Hamlet's failure to obey any of his father's commands—the Ghost reappears at this moment and reiterates their contradictory nature: do not forget your "almost blunted purpose" of revenge, and have pity on your mother's weakness (III.iv. 110-16).

In the midst of playing avenger, however, Hamlet has finally glimpsed the truth. An aficionado of the drama, he knows that he has been merely acting the part of the stock Elizabethan/Jacobean stage avenger. After seeing the passion of the player for Hecuba, he whips himself into a frenzied speech that might have won applause for Kyd's Hieronimo or Marston's Malevole or Tourneur's Vindice:
I should have fatted all the region kites
With this slave's offal: bloody, bawdy villain!
Remorseless, treacherous, lecherous, kindless
villain!
O, vengeance!

(II.ii.607-10)

But immediately he steps down from the stage to become the audience and critic of his own performance: "This is most brave, / That I … Must, like a whore, unpack my heart with words" (II.ii.611-12, 614). Instead of doing the deed, which he cannot perform because of the Ghost's contradictory commands, he continues, despite his self-realization, to play the role of the doer, an expedient that provides only fleeting moments of relief. Perhaps his excuse for not killing Claudius in the chapel can best be described in terms of his posturing as a ruthless avenger. Right after staging an abortive revenge tragedy and just before finding Claudius alone, Hamlet meditates,

'Tis now the very witching time of night,
When churchyards yawn and hell itself
breathes out
Contagion to this world: now could I drink
hot blood,
And do such bitter business as the day
Would quake to look on.

(III.ii.406-10)

Here he seems more like a stage character—Lucianus or the brutal Pyrrhus on his way to slaughter Priam—than the intelligent but deeply disillusioned Prince who speaks Hamlet's other soliloquies. Elation over his successful revenge play has encouraged him to bring to life the attitudes of art. When confronted with Claudius' real throat to cut, of course, he balks. But he turns even his hesitation into a sentiment worthy of the most sinister stage avenger:

Up, sword; and know thou a more horrid hent:
When he is … about some act
That has no relish of salvation in 't;
Then trip him, that his heels may kick at
heaven,
And that his soul may be as damn'd and
black
As hell, whereto it goes.

(II.ii.88-95)

Hamlet both surpasses his father's command and avoids obeying it by planning to kill Claudius' soul with his body—at some unspecified future date. Once again, then, playing the remorseless avenger has freed him from the double bind—but only momentarily.

Soon all his evasions fail, and when he is arrested in Act IV, his behavior becomes careless and chaotic. The double binds in which their families have ensnared them have finally pushed Hamlet and Ophelia to the breaking point. After failing to discharge his duty, Hamlet is cornered by the Ghost; after inadvertently killing Polonius, he is cornered by Claudius. Unable to play his way out of these corners, he drops all disguises, threatening Claudius with the story of "how a king may go a progress through the guts of a beggar" (IV.iii.32-33) and telling him cleverly, but clearly, to go to hell. Hamlet's grisly jokes about the odor of decay and the "politic worms" which will fatten themselves on Claudius' minister of policy are no longer merely
feigned madness; they resemble the astute perceptions often associated, by Shakespeare's contemporaries as well as by modern psychologists, with the truly mad.

In fact, Hamlet is not finally maddened by the double bind, because he is forced into the escape he could not choose for himself. Claudius, fearing for his own life, banishes Hamlet from his "prison," as the Prince once called Denmark.

XI

Ophelia, meanwhile, can only retreat into madness. But why now? Everyone who had assaulted her with contradictory messages is gone: her father is dead, her brother has not yet returned from France, and her erst-while lover is banished. Why is she not now freed to grow into a sexual woman who is neither a child nor a whore? The answer is that she has already been stunted and is now too weak to cope with this forced separation from her family. Surely, Polonius being who he is, the audience can assume that the double binds imposed on Ophelia by her father are of long standing. After years of experiencing the confusing patterns of communication characteristic of this reverend counselor, she has learned not to think, and has settled into a family homeostasis which, although irrational, is stable. Separation from a family in which double-bind patterns prevail often introduces instability and thus produces madness in young adults. This is, in part, Ophelia's plight. The double binds that threaten Hamlet's sanity may be more terrifying, but they are extraordinary and have occurred only recently; those that destroy Ophelia's prove more devastating because they have been insidious and constant for most of her life.

The overtly sexual references in Ophelia's mad ramblings strike every amateur Freudian as indications of the repressions imposed by her father and her society. Less obvious, but no less significant, the nowin position of the heroine depicted in her valentine song epitomizes the double-bind situation fostered by Ophelia's almost exclusively male world. The naive lass in the song (IV.v.47-66) wants to assure herself of being her lad's valentine. So, counting on the belief that he must choose the first girl he sees on Valentine's Day morning, she innocently goes to his window. With a proposal of marriage, he seduces her, then rejects her as unfit to be his wife because she is no longer a virgin. If she refuses his sexual offer, she will jeopardize her marriage proposal; but because she accepts the offer, he withdraws the proposal. Like Ophelia, the lass is simultaneously treated like a whore and told to be a virgin; she is tempted and then damned as lewd. Ironically, the narrator in the song, like the audience to Ophelia's plight, perceives the incongruity in the demands of such young men: "By cock, they are to blame." But even though her song recalls and clarifies her own situation, Ophelia has lost all clarity of vision herself, and her mad actions dramatize her paralysis between child-like innocence and adult sexual knowledge. Gently singing and smilingly passing out flowers, "She turns," says her brother, "Thought and affliction, passion, hell itself … to favour and to prettiness" (IV.v. 188-89). But each flower accurately characterizes the vice of its recipient, and the garland she chooses for herself is made of

long purples
That liberal shepherds give a grosser name,
But our cold maids do dead men's fingers call them.

(IV. vii. 170-72)

Instead of being "tumbled" in her lad's bed like the lass in her song, Ophelia, along with her coronet of penile flowers, tumbles into a brook to become a cold maid indeed. The gravedigger may have been correct in labeling her death self-defense: it defends her from the intolerable contradictions of her life.

XII
Hamlet's defense is, for a time, more fortunate. With the onset of true madness forestalled by his banishment, he is forcibly removed from the scene of his contradictory obligations long enough to achieve a new perspective on them. Although the audience does not see the events that precipitate this change, it does see a different man as Hamlet approaches the graveyard in Act V. For the first time in the play, Hamlet, once the master of repartee, is bested in a game of wits, and that by a "clown," a worldly-wise grave-digger. Once the mordant court jester to Claudius, Hamlet now sees in the skull of an earlier jester the truth that not even the "gibes," "gambols," and "infinite jest" of such madcap rogues as Yorick can elude death. Once the actors' actor, Hamlet so disdains Laertes' histrionic rendition of the grief-stricken brother that he cannot forbear parodying the latter's extravagant mourning. In the face of death, Hamlet has discovered the futility of his past playing—playing with words, playing the fool, and playing the avenger.

Later, when Hamlet tells Horatio of his adventures, the audience learns what has jolted him into this new perspective. By the guiding hand of Providence, he believes, he could not sleep at sea, so he rashly stole his captors' letters and thereby discovered Claudius' plot against his life.

Being thus be-netted round with villanies,—
Ere I could make a prologue to my brains,
They had begun the play.

(V.ii.29-31)

Hamlet no longer upbraids himself as an actor who avoids real action by unpacking his heart with words; yet he remains a player. Before "some craven scruple / Of thinking too precisely on th' event" (IV.iv.40-41) can intervene, his brain begins to enact a drama not of his own devising. After experiencing what seem to him to be Providential coincidences—having with him his father's signet ring to seal the execution order for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and escaping on a pirate ship whose brigands willingly serve him instead of slitting his throat—Hamlet comes to believe in "a divinity that shapes our ends, / Rough-hew them how we will" (V.ii.10-11). He will be a player who waits in the wings for Providence to give him his cue: "The readiness is all" (V.ii.233). This shift in perspective releases him from both the fear of Claudius' traps and the double bind of the Ghost's contradictory commands—because a higher power than either an earthly king or an apparition from beyond the grave has written the play and determined who will be punished and who will be spared, who will play the role of avenger and when the catastrophe will come.

No longer needing to play either the madman or the avenger to defend his life and sanity, Hamlet goes calmly to the duel, telling Laertes that he "will this brother's wager frankly play" (V.ii.264). But Hamlet is unaware that the fencing match and its accompanying wager are a deadly game he cannot win. Because of Laertes' unbated, poisoned sword and Claudius' poisoned congratulatory cup, he will die either way—by the sword if he loses the match, and by the cup if he wins. The duel recalls the double-bind patterns that have snared Hamlet and Ophelia throughout the drama. To ensure justice, however, Providence reverses the bind. As Hamlet and Laertes "play" (a word the stage directions use four times), Claudius unwittingly prepares the perfect setting for the damnation of his soul with his body. Hamlet finally encounters Claudius amid a carousal with drink, drums, trumpets, and cannons like the one Hamlet had earlier blamed for soiling Denmark's reputation, and "At game … about some act / That has no relish of salvation in't" (III.iii.91-92). Claudius' clever game has become the means of a fitting vengeance, and he enacts his own punishment in the last scene of Providence's larger play. In his hesitation to murder the King in his chapel, Hamlet has been an unknowing player in a revenge drama superseding the one he had planned. By sparing Claudius' body, Hamlet has allowed the King to damn his own soul.

Laertes and Claudius arrange a game that Hamlet cannot win. But Providence stages a larger play that binds Laertes, Claudius, and Gertrude to their sins. As Hamlet realizes before he agrees "to play" the fatal wager, death will eventually net one and all: "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" (V.ii.231-33). In the end, everyone is trapped by death. But, in death, what is the
state of those souls less guilty than Claudius’?

XIII

The play repeatedly raises the question: what are the results in the next world of actions performed in this one? But the play gives no answers, portraying the realm beyond the grave as unknowable. The Ghost is "forbid / To tell the secrets of [his] prison-house" (I.v.13-14). Indeed, this very initiator of the play's action is itself a "questionable shape"—either "spirit of health or goblin damn'd" (I.iv.43, 40). The play never confirms which. Not even the Mousetrap resolves the issue. It confirms that the Ghost has told the truth about Claudius' treachery; but as we know from Macbeth, devis may tells truths do damn souls.29 Hamlet's meditation on the results of human action, "To be, or not to be," confronts the blank wall of "something after death, / The undiscover'd country" (III.i.78-79). The state of Ophelia's soul is as "doubtful" as her death. Is she a damned suicide, as the skeptical gravediggers and the legalistic priest imply, or a "minist'ring angel" (V.i.250, 264), as her loving brother prophesies? Even the eternal fate of Rosen-crantz and Guildenstern is ambiguous. Although Hamlet sends them to their deaths, "Not shriving-time allow'd" (V.ii.47), for their part in Claudius' murder plot, do they die in mortal sin? Did they knowingly conspire with Claudius or have they been dupes to the end?

These questions about the results in the other world of actions in this world climax at Hamlet's death. In accomplishing the providential revenge, is he God's approved "minister" or His "scourge," an already damned soul used to accomplish divine retribution?30 When he doubts the Ghost, Hamlet fears damnation if he does kill Claudius (II.ii.627-32); but when he returns from his voyage, he fears damnation if he does not (V.ii.67-70). Will his slayings of Polonius and Laertes, his role in the executions of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, his indirect part in Ophelia's death, and his revenge against Claudius send him to hell? Although critics answer this question in various ways, the play itself is significantly silent.31 And Hamlet knows the eternal unknowableness of what lies beyond the grave: "since no man of aught he leaves knows, what is't to leave betimes" (V.ii.233-35).

This final perspective releases Hamlet from the Ghost's crippling double bind, because it reveals that for Christians life itself imposes what appears to be a double bind. God's commandments require man, in a world of deceptive appearances, to take moral responsibility for his actions, the results of which he cannot know; but God's omnipotence shapes these actions to His own inscrutable ends no matter what choices a person makes; and no one can escape from the field, even through "self-slaughter." In Act I, Horatio and Marcellus unknowingly articulate the poles of this paradox. The scholar counsels patient non-action in response to the Ghost's revelation of rottenness in Denmark: "Heaven will direct it." The soldier urges immediate, responsible action: "Nay, let's follow" the desperate Hamlet and the silent Ghost (I.iv.91). For three intervening acts, maddening confusion plagues Hamlet, and only when he returns in Act V does he transcend the original double binds by recognizing—philosophically, if not familially—the basic incongruity at the heart of human life.

As psychologists, literary critics, and theologians all observe in their different disciplines, paradoxes and double binds precipitate creative leaps to higher levels of insight as often as they bring about psychotic episodes.32 Hamlet takes one of these creative leaps beyond the double bind when he decides that he must act in "perfect conscience" and quickly—"the interim is mine" (V.ii.67, 73)—allowing Providence to shape his rough hewing and recognizing that he cannot know what judgment his actions will receive beyond the grave. His last earthly acts are to ensure that the truth be told and that Elsinore have a ruler—acts that secure the future of his "name" and his country in this world. Unlike Horatio, he has nothing to say about "flights of angels" singing him to a heavenly reward in the next world. All he knows is that "The rest is silence" (V.ii.371, 369).

Notes
1Hamlet, in The Complete Works of Shakespeare, rev. ed. by Hardin Craig and Craig and David Bevington (Glenview, Ill.; Scott, Foresman and Company, 1973), III.iii.38-43. All quotations from Hamlet follow this edition. The author gratefully acknowledges the assistance of the Louisiana State University Research Council in completing this project.

2 Tony Manocchio and William Pettit, in Families Under Stress: A Psychological Interpretation (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1975), pp. 56-101, have noted that Hamlet and Ophelia are trapped in double binds, but the authors use the play to illustrate the theory more than they use the theory to illuminate the complexities of the play.


6 Paul A. Jorgensen uses Freud's theories of mourning and melancholia to account for Hamlet's calm in Act V. Because he vents his anger on its proper object, his mother, when he visits her after the Mousetrap, Hamlet in Act V is no longer plagued with the melancholy which his repressed rage had caused. See "Hamlet's Therapy," Huntington Library Quarterly, 27 (1964), 239-58.


9 Ibid., p. 17.

10 Many revisions of the original double-bind theory emphasize that an observer ought not to isolate a "binder" and a "victim" in families where double-bind patterns of communication predominate. Generally, the binds are mutually imposed, and assigning blame to one family member for beginning the pattern has little relevance to the present situation. Although living beings in human families are too complex for such labels, families portrayed in art may more clearly reveal the source of the double bind.


13 Although some critics have argued that "adulterate" did not have such a specific meaning, the Ghost's word at least implies that Gertrude may have been an adulteress—an implication sufficient to taint Hamlet's mind. For opposing views, see John Dover Wilson, *What Happens in Hamlet* (London: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1935), pp. 292-94, and McElroy, *Shakespeare's Mature Tragedies*, p. 53.


16 Although he attributes Hamlet's confusion to unstated scruples about taking revenge, John Lawlor (*The Tragic Sense*, pp. 45, 66, 72) agrees that Hamlet does not understand himself, and that his lack of self-knowledge is what makes his soliloquies pose unanswerable questions.


22 Nigel Alexander analyzes *duel* as one of the three crucial symbolic actions in the play (*Poison, Play, and Duel*).

23 Similarly, a schizophrenic will often try to escape from double-bind interactions by insisting that either he or the other person is really someone else or is not really present. See Bateson, et al., "Toward a Theory of Schizophrenia," in *Double Bind*, p. 9. Eleanor Prosser argues that the Ghost is, in fact, a "goblin damned" who urges Hamlet to commit the mortal sin of murder (*Hamlet and Revenge*, pp. 108-22).
24 Although the Craig-Bevington edition prefers the reading "Tropically," the Q1 reading is "Trapically."


26 Nigel Alexander discusses Hamlet's failure to love Ophelia (Poison, Play, and Duel, pp. 119-52). Hamlet calls her a puppet in III.i.257. In Grigori Kozintsev's Russian film of Hamlet (1966), Ophelia is being given dancing lessons when the audience first sees her, and her puppet-like movements are repeated in her mad scene. Before "The Murder of Gonzago," she is laced into an inhumanly restrictive bodice of a black dress with a prominent wire collar.

27 Prosser, Hamlet and Revenge, p. 213.

28 For discussions of Hamlet's playing avenger, see Prosser, Hamlet and Revenge, p. 192; Charney, Style in Hamlet, p. 318; Battenhouse, Shakespearean Tragedy, pp. 255-56; Danson, Tragic Alphabet, pp. 44-45; Lanham, The Motives of Eloquence, pp. 134-36. Hieronimo, Malevole, and Vindice are the avengers in three popular revenge tragedies of the period: Thomas Kyd's The Spanish Tragedy (ca. 1587), John Marston's The Malcontent (1604), and Cyril Tourneur's The Revenger's Tragedy (pub. 1607).

29 Prosser, Hamlet and Revenge, pp. 111-12.

30 See III.iv.175. Fredson Bowers argues that the two terms, scourge and minister, had these distinct meanings in sixteenth-century England; "Hamlet as Minister and Scourge," PMLA, 70 (1955), 740-49. R. W. Dent, however, cites contemporary evidence of scourge bearing no implication of taint or need for eventual punishment: "Hamlet: Scourge and Minister," Shakespeare Quarterly, 29 (1978), 82-84.


32 See Gregory Bateson, "Double Bind (1969)"); Lyman C. Wynne, "On the Anguish, and Creative Passions, of Not Escaping Double Binds"; and Richard Rabkin, "Critique of the Clinical Use of the Double Bind Hypothesis"; in Double Bind, pp. 237-50, 287-306. Bateson (pp. 241-42) describes an experiment with a porpoise that, as odd as it seems, may illuminate Hamlet's transformation in Act V. The female porpoise had been trained to expect a whistle followed by food when she raised her head above the water. She had learned a context for behavior. But her trainer wanted her to present a new piece of behavior each time she entered the tank. Thus she must learn the context of the first context. Naturally on her second entrance into the tank, she futilely raised her head above the water. Only by accident did she produce a new piece of behavior, a tail flap, and receive a reward. For fourteen sessions the confused porpoise continued to perform the most recently rewarded behavior, producing new behaviors only by accident. Before the fifteenth session, however, she was
visibly excited, and when let into the tank "she put on an elaborate performance including eight conspicuous pieces of behavior of which four were entirely new—never before observed in this species of animal." Like the porpoise who had learned how to learn, Hamlet has transcended double binds by leaping to a higher level of insight.

**Hamlet (Vol. 35): Madness**

Paul A. Jorgensen (essay date 1963-64)


[Below, Jorgensen undertakes a psychological study of Hamlet's malady in terms of Renaissance and Freudian interpretations of melancholy as repressed anger, misdirected toward one's self rather than expressed outwardly.]

It is the purpose of this essay to call attention to an important, though doubtless secondary, objective of Hamlet's pilgrimage (like a Spenserian knight he can have more than one). This is the regaining of the sanity which he had formerly displayed as an ideal prince. Hamlet does recover; and his recovery is a part of the drama which grips us. Only thus can we fully account for the much-discussed "regeneration" of the hero in a play whose primary image is disease. And only thus can we realize the fullest meaning of his most impassioned speeches. We must view them as Hamlet's groping his way from an initial torpor and grief, through conscious anger, to a clear-sighted though troubled sanity. This groping serves as a prelude to his tragic wisdom and to his restoration as one who would have proved most royally had he been put on.

Unlike other psychological students of the play, I am not primarily concerned with the almost hopeless task of precisely diagnosing Hamlet's malady, and I am glad to agree with most critics\(^1\) that it is mainly patho-logical grief and its consequent disturbance, melancholia. My concern is a happier one, to show how he achieves what we would today call psychotherapy. My major evidence outside the play is from Renaissance treatises. Those dealing with remedies for grief and melancholia are usually, to Shakespeare's enormous credit, only partly relevant to Hamlet. The best of them, however, achieve an insight that is borne out by Freud and later students. I shall not hesitate, from too great allegiance to historical scholarship, to avail myself of a doctrine merely because it has not become outmoded. Freud's Oedipal view of Hamlet is unacceptable to most literary students; but one cannot so easily dispose of Freudian theories that are supported by the text of the play and by Renaissance psychology. What is certain is that Shakespeare achieved insights into psycho-therapy which, though deriving from sixteenth-century theory, go centuries beyond the crude formulations of this theory. This he did as a dramatist and not as a philosopher-psychologist, in which prosaic capacity he is firmly rooted in his own age.

Today we are decreasingly interested in what was formerly the big question of the play: Was Hamlet mad? The opinion of most literary scholars and psychoanalysts is that Hamlet, as he tells us, is afflicted by "sore distraction," that he occasionally suffers hysteria and mania, but that as a tragic hero he becomes sane enough to be responsible for his actions. This does not, however, rule out the temporary presence of disabling grief and melancholia, the most poignant qualities in his early soliloquies. Concerning Hamlet's mental disturbance, A. C. Bradley writes:

And if the pathologist calls his state melancholia, and even proceeds to determine its species, I see nothing to object to in that; I am grateful to him for emphasizing the fact that Hamlet's melancholy was no more common depression of spirits; and I have no doubt that many readers of the play would understand it better if they read an account of melancholia in a work on mental diseases.\(^2\)
Bradley is right. If we turn to Freud's essay "Mourning and Melancholia" we find the following:

The distinguishing mental features of melancholia are a profoundly painful dejection, cessation of interest in the outside world, loss of the capacity to love, inhibition of all activity, and a lowering of the self-regarding feelings to a degree that finds utterance in self-reproaches and self-revilings, and culminates in a delusional expectation of punishment. This picture becomes a little more intelligible when we consider that … the same traits are met with in mourning.³

This is the Hamlet that we see at the beginning of the play and generally throughout the first three acts. But a change surely occurs, and many critics have noticed it. Bradley (p. 120) observes in the fifth act "a slight thinning of the dark cloud of melancholy." This, he thinks, may be part of a new sense of power after his dispatching of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, but mainly it is a "kind of religious resignation." According to O. J. Campbell, Shakespeare "does not leave his audience with the view of Hamlet as a slave to a kind of mental malady. The fatal wound in the Prince's breast restores his equilibrium and produces a brief interval of serenity."⁴ Robert Ornstein also attributes the improvement mainly to a last-minute confrontation of death, though he does see an improvement after the sea voyage.⁵ J. Q. Adams, who has made the only extensive psychological study of Hamlet's recovery, places the change in III.iv, with the appearance of the Ghost. According to Adams, the whole play breaks here:

From this time on Hamlet is increasingly better. He begins to display more interest in life, he takes on a more hopeful attitude towards the world, his thinking loses much of its morbid quality, and his confidence in human nature is in part restored. … In the final scenes of the play—as in the jesting with Osric, or in the friendly fencing contest with Laertes—his melancholia has almost disappeared.⁶

Adams' estimate of the time of Hamlet's change is convincing, for the last scenes must show Hamlet acting rationally; insight delayed to the moment of death does not occur for even so slow a thinker as Othello. But Adams has no better reason for Hamlet's recovery than that melancholia passes normally through several stages, and recovery is, in time, inevitable. Time was indeed a Renaissance explanation for some cures,⁷ but it was hardly a dramatic or significant one. Shakespeare worked his hero's cure into the dramatic texture of the play.

Because Renaissance psychotherapy has been inadequately studied, it may be useful to survey briefly some of the approaches. Perhaps the most favored for melancholia was a religious one. But Hamlet does not, because he is not really a guilty soul, fit the category written about by so many Elizabethan divines. Paul H. Kocher has ably differentiated between the psychologically (or physiologically) and the religiously caused melancholia.⁸ Hamlet, unlike Lady Macbeth or Claudius with his "sick soul," would not have been classified as suffering from an afflicted conscience, which often had symptoms similar to psychological melancholia.⁹

When divines did offer guidance for psychological melancholia, they were not particularly helpful. When it is not manifestly derivative from psychological works, their advice (as exemplified by Thomas Adams, William Perkins, and Bishop Abernethy) is to mortify the passions. If the suffering is incurable, according to Perkins, "wee must humble our selves for our unquietnesse of minde. … It is Gods will that we should suffer affliction, and withall humble our selves under his mightie hand."¹⁰ There may be a hint of this attitude in the "religious resignation" which Hamlet has been presumed to suffer (or achieve) at the end of the play, partially in his acceptance of Heaven's will in the punishment which will follow his slaying of Polonius and more clearly in his "There's a special providence in the fall of a sparrow."¹¹ But Hamlet's psychological recovery, while perhaps related to this, is something achieved through the mind and emotions rather than through the will. I shall, however, refer to the religious theme later in the essay.
Moral philosophers were as busy as divines in offering advice and consolation. What is more, there is abundant evidence of their prescriptions in Hamlet; so much, in fact, that one might assume that they are held up as the ideal therapists. In a valuable article, "Hamlet's Book," Hardin Craig proposes that the volume which Hamlet enters reading (II.ii.168), and which he presumably reads during his solitude, is a familiar book of consolation, a work by Girolamo Cardano translated as Cardanus Comforthe (1576). Professor Craig is undoubtedly correct in writing that "belief in the therapeutic power of books was characteristic of Renaissance students. If a hero found himself stricken with grief, as Hamlet did, it was natural that he should re-sort to a work on consolation. Cardano wrote De consolatione to comfort himself and all those stricken with grief (p. 18). Craig stresses the resultant universalizing of Hamlet's plight if we view him as benefiting from this moving book, for Cardano makes it clear that most of humanity is involved in the struggle against grief, fear, and weakness. Like other moral philosophers, Cardano stresses reasonableness and, above all, fortitude, which is principally what the grieving Hamlet has to learn.

Cardano is in the tradition of Plutarch, Cicero, Seneca, Boethius, and Thomas More. These writers have perhaps too little sympathy with human weakness or with strong, uncontrolled passions. Cardano is typical of them in writing, in a passage that seems to bear suggestively on Hamlet:

As therefore to cowards and men of no virtue, the timely death of the father hath ever brought hinderance: So to noble mindes: it be occasion whereby to shew themselves as they be. Thys must also be set before our eyes, that both lyfe and death be the gyftes of God, and do evermore depende upon his providence. Therefore whosoever reproveth lyfe or Death, doeth in sylence disalowe & complayne of the devine Judgement, because both the one and the other is mete and profitable. (fol. 45v)

A similarly stern note is heard in: "A follye I do think to comforte those that through debility of mynde do cast themselves into misery: as foule delight, and desperate revenges" (fol. 10r). Nevertheless even Cardano recognizes the occasional inadequacy of stern reason in dealing with grief: "for oftentimes, thoughe reason conforte us, and teache us that neither mourninge, is mete, neither that there is any cause of mourning, yet the sadde mynde of it selfe can not bee merye" (fol. 15v). He must have known this from personal experience—a circumstance which lifts the Comforte above most books of consolation. Philippe de Mornay, another very wise and sensitive commentator on human misery, states what perhaps Hamlet and other students felt about the utility of the moral philosophers in dealing with mental suffering: "They pacify not the debates a man feeles in himselfe, they cure not the diseases of his minde."13

Hamlet may envy Horatio his Stoic self-sufficiency, his moderation, his ability to suffer all yet suffer nothing. He may read endlessly in the books (or book) of the philosophers. But so doing does not greatly help him. Much of the advice of Cardano and the other moral therapists is reproduced in the play, but it is not given the best of spokesmen. It is put into the mouths of Claudius and Gertrude. In the second scene, Hamlet is told that the death of fathers is common and natural, that to mourn excessively shows a will most incorrect to Heaven, a mind impatient. His attitude toward such reasoning is that "'tis common," probably implying that it is too much a matter of commonplace books and not enough a matter of dearly purchased experience. It is Claudius who triumphantly lays claim to successful conquest of grief, and through the very precepts of the "common" moral treatises:

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,
Yet so far hath discretion fought with nature
That we with wisest sorrow think on him
Together with remembrance of ourselves.
(I.ii.1-7)

Hamlet cannot so easily dispel grief and melancholia. Nor do I think Shakespeare felt it a culpable flaw in him
to fail in so doing. With Brabantio in Othello, Hamlet might say: "But words are words; I never yet did hear / That the bruis'd heart was pierced through the ear" (I.iii.218-219); or with the grieving Leonato in Much Ado
about Nothing:

I will be flesh and blood;
For there was never yet philosopher
That could endure the toothache patiently.
(V.i.34-36)

Perhaps what is fundamentally wrong with the comfort books and the books of stern exhortation is that they
talk at the patient. Shakespeare seems to have felt the hollowness of their encouragement and the futility of
their comfort. We know from later experiences in treating melancholia that more dynamic methods, deriving
from the patient's experiencing of emotion, are needed. These, moreover, would be ideally suited to drama.

Besides divines and moral philosophers, the Renaissance had many psychological writers, some of whom
were also divines and some strictly physicians. But men like Timothy Bright, André du Laurens, Thomas
Wright, Nicolas Coeffeteau, and Robert Burton, regardless of their area of learning, usually divide their
therapy between the body and the mind. Therapy through the body was surely the least brilliant achievement
of Renaissance psychology. Shakespeare ignores it in Hamlet (though he does not do so in King Lear). If
Hamlet's disease had been humoral, then bloodletting, baths, and a very complicated diet would have been
indicated. Significantly, none of those trying to cure Hamlet once suggest such procedures. Hence, most of
the predominantly medical treatises are of no relevance.

Hamlet's relatives and supposed friends attempt to cure him by other strategies, most of them endorsed by the
psychologists; and Shakespeare provides for his hero, in Horatio, one of the most commonly approved
remedies for melancholia: a faithful friend. The friend should serve as someone to whom the sufferer can
express his griefs and confide his secrets and in whom he can see the wholesomeness of sanity; a melancholy
friend is dangerous. In all respects Horatio is exemplary. Hamlet sees in him a model of sanity, and Horatio is
also an extraordinarily good listener. His "Ay, my lord" is his most characteristic utterance. But we do not
very often witness Hamlet confiding any important emotions to Horatio. His most heartfelt unhappinesses are
expressed in soliloquy. However, we should notice the degree to which Hamlet brightens up when he first
sees Horatio, and even his exhaliration when he meets the two false friends, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern.

The latter two, incidentally, seem to be provided by the King not only as a means of sounding out Hamlet but
as a possible way to cure the youth whose antics cause him and the court so much annoyance. They come to
Hamlet as therapeutic friends. Rosencrantz explains to the Prince the psychological usefulness which
doubtless Claudius sees in Hamlet's two schoolfellows: "You do surely bar the door of your own liberty if you
deny your griefs to your friend" (III.ii.351-353). Guildenstern, upon receiving his charge from the King,
exclaims: "Heavens make our presence and our practices / Pleasant and helpful to him!" (II.ii.38-39). And
Claudius himself clarifies (at least ostensibly) his motives to both schoolmates:

so by your companies
To draw him on to pleasure, and to gather
So much as from occasions you may glean,
Whether aught, to us unknown, afflicts him
thus,
That, open'd, lies within our remedy.
For Claudius is one of the principal characters in the play trying to cure Hamlet. One of his most eager remarks occurs when Polonius makes his promising, but mistaken, diagnosis: love melancholy. Claudius, hearing of a likely solution, exclaims, "O, speak of that; that do I long to hear" (II.ii.50). Hamlet's therapy, not his death, has been Claudius' attempt from the beginning, and remains so probably until Claudius becomes aware of Hamlet's murderous intent. We have seen that the King's first words to Hamlet are aimed at correcting the Prince's stubborn grief. Claudius, in fact, follows in this scene the traditional prescription for a therapist given by Robert Burton:

By all means, therefore, fair promises, good words, gentle persuasions are to be used, not to be too rigorous at first, or to insult over them, not to deride, neglect, or contemn, but rather, as Lemnius exhorteth, to pity, and by all plausible means to seek to reduce them: but if satisfaction may not be had, mild courses, promises, comfortable speeches, and good counsel, will not take place; then, as Christopherus àVega determines, to handle them more roughly, to threaten and chide. …

Thus Claudius turns from "comfortable speeches" to a rougher handling during this scene. He is at first the kindly, fatherly counselor; then the severe uncle-father. Whether or not Claudius is sincerely seeking Hamlet's recovery, others would have viewed his solicitous and expert ministrations in this light.

The "precept" technique having failed, Claudius listens eagerly, but skeptically, to Polonius' diagnosis, and then endorses another psychological remedy for melancholia: diversion, particularly in the form of a play. This proves to be an even more disastrous failure. After the murder of Polonius, Claudius proposes on his own another of the perennial remedies, this one being sea travel:

Haply the seas and countries different
With variable objects shall expel
This something-settled matter in his heart,
Whereon his brains still beating puts him thus
From fashion of himself.

(III.i.179-183)

Psychologists were divided about the efficacy of this therapy, since it did not really alter the patient's view of himself or others. It is very unlikely that the sea voyage makes Hamlet psychologically well. The improvement is noticeable before he leaves Denmark. But the voyage promised to be useful to Claudius, while still preserving his reputation as a kindly therapist.

The Queen is to prove, in a way she does not guess, to be instrumental in Hamlet's recovery. But in her own shallow way, she too has been trying from the outset to cure her son. Her first diagnosis is a simple and fairly sound one: "I doubt it is no other but the main, / His father's death and our o'erhasty marriage" (II.ii.56-57). But upon hearing Polonius' diagnosis, she changes, perhaps without much conviction, to a new hope:

And for your part, Ophelia, I do wish
That your good beauties be the happy cause
Of Hamlet's wildness. So shall I hope your virtues
Will bring him to his wonted way again,
To both your honours.

(III.i.38-42)
It was believed, by du Laurens among others, that a victim of love melancholy could be improved by the possession of the love object. But Hamlet promptly relieves both Claudius and Gertrude of any hope on this score.

The play becomes more considerably a study in psychotherapy if we recognize that most of the principal characters—Claudius, Gertrude, Polonius, and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern—are engaged in the frustrating business of trying to diagnose and cure Hamlet's malady. But he is not a pipe for all fingers to play upon. The source of his grief, like the grief itself, passes show. Above all, he illustrates what seems to have been Shakespeare's attitude to psychotherapy from without. One of the most poignant and lasting questions in Shakespeare is Macbeth's "Canst thou not minister to a mind diseas'd … ?" (V.iv.40). And the doctor's answer points the way toward what truly occurs in Hamlet: "Therein the patient / Must minister to himself." Hamlet recovers as a tragic hero and not merely as a mental patient. He achieves a new wisdom and self-knowledge; and this, I believe, is through the very modern, but also Renaissance, process of bringing to awareness his deepest feelings.

What is it in Hamlet's extremely complex nature that must come to the surface of consciousness? Many readers have noticed with dismay a ferocious quality in the gentle, meditative Prince. His treatment of Ophelia, if we are inclined to an ideal picture, approaches motiveless cruelty. Bradley came close to the truth when he observed Hamlet's "almost savage irritability" (pp. 105-106). This anger is not, obviously, the fact about him-self that Hamlet most clearly recognizes in the first part of the play. It is, however, not unnoticed by Hamlet's keenest and most interested observer, Claudius. Near the midpoint of the play, the King perceives what I think the Renaissance would have recognized as the underlying source of 'Hamlet's melancholia. He calls it a "danger," but he is referring to the latent, grimly angry quality in Hamlet:

There's something in his soul
O'er which his melancholy sits on brood,
And I do doubt the hatch and the disclose
Will be some danger. …
(III.i.172-175)

It is "the hatch and the disclose" of Hamlet's anger which gives mounting drama to the play even as it gives the sick Prince health. It is fully recognized by Hamlet himself late in the play when he warns Laertes:

Sir, though I am not splenitive and rash,
Yet have I something in me dangerous,
Which let thy wiseness fear.
(V.i.284-286)

Melancholia is today recognized as often due to repressed rage. The anger, instead of being turned outward, is turned upon oneself, with resultant dejection, apathy, and self-reviling. This is the message of Dr. Karl Menninger's Man against Himself (1938). It was also so interpreted by Freud: "The self-tormenting in melancholia … signifies, just like the corresponding phenomenon in the obsessional neurosis, a satisfaction of trends of sadism and hate which relate to an object, and which have been turned round upon the subject's own self" (p. 251).

Objections to a Freudian interpretation of Shakespeare are often made on the grounds that it is anachronistic. We have here, however, a Freudian interpretation that was almost a Renaissance commonplace, with the one exception that Renaissance psychology did not construct a systematic theory based upon the unconscious. The system came much later, but the theory itself was both expounded by psychologists and depended upon for the correct interpretation of literary character.
The Renaissance recognized the inevitable relationship of passions, as it did of complexions. Joy may, as Miss Campbell has pointed out (p. 115), be the emotion commonly linked with grief. Such a connection was, however, one of the most obvious and least sophisticated observations made by Renaissance psychology. It was a far more brilliant observation to see that grief (with its resultant sorrow or melancholia) was inseparably linked with anger. Writing of pathological sorrow, Jean François Senault states:

Choler is of the same condition; though she make so much noise, she draws all her force from the Passions which compose her; and she appears not to be courageous, save only that she is well accompanied; she is never raised in our souls uncalled by Sorrow; she endeavors not satisfaction for injuries done unto her, unless solicited by Desire, provoked by Hope, and encouraged by Audacity; for he that is irritated, promiseth himself revenge of his enemy; but when he is so weak, as he cannot hope for it, his Choler turns to Sadnesse. … 21

The theory of the unconscious is here, but imperfect; for the false assumption is made that only fear of reprisal keeps one from venting anger and thus avoiding sorrow. A similar linking of choler and grief occurs in an earlier work, Coeffeteau's A Table of Humane Passions: "we must remember that Choler is also full of griefe and bitternesse, for that it propounds the injury received, the which shee cannot easily disgest …" (p. 559). And it occurs in Burton: "Anger, a perturbation, which carries the spirits outwards, preparing the body to melancholy, and madness itself (p. 233). The connection between the two emotions goes back, however, not only to Shakespeare's time (e.g., Timothy Bright) but even to the classical period. In fact, one of the sources in which Shakespeare was most likely to have read of suppressed anger turning into sorrow or grief is Plutarch's life of Coriolanus. Martius alone, Plutarch writes, showed no outward anger at his banishment.

Not that he did patiently bear and temper his good hap, in respect of any reason he had, or by his quiet condition: but because he was so carried away with the vehemency of anger, and desire of revenge, that he had no sense nor feeling of the hard estate he was in, which the common people judge not to be sorrow, although it is the very same. For when sorrow (as you would say) is set afire, then it is converted into spite or malice. … 22

The important adjunct of suppressed anger turning into grief is that, as Freud has noticed, the individual punishes himself. This tendency of grief to be self-punishing was noticed by Coeffeteau in 1621, though with inadequate emphasis upon the role of anger: "the soule helpes to afflict herselfe, whether that melancholy workes this effect, or that the continuali afflictions oppresse her in such sort, as she doth nothing but sigh under the burthen of sorrow …" (p. 327). Shakespeare seems to have recognized more clearly than did psychologists the necessity for a choice between punishing oneself and punishing the real (external) source of grief. Hamlet affords the most sustained dramatic evidence of his awareness, but in other works the message is made more explicitly.

In Much Ado about Nothing Antonio tries to comfort his brother, Leonato, not only by hortatory words … but by more dynamic psychological advice. He warns him of the danger and foolishness of self-recrimination:

If you go on thus, you will kill yourself;  
And 'tis not wisdom thus to second grief  
Against yourself.  
(V.i.1-3)

And he offers the sensible therapeutic advice: "Yet bend not all the harm upon yourself; / Make those that do offend you suffer too" (V.i.39-40).

A more sustained example of Shakespeare's depiction of paralytic grief slowly exposing the anger beneath occurs in The Rape of Lucrece. When Collatinus learns of the rape of his wife, he first exemplifies, as though
in a speaking picture, the spectacle of one's grief raging, mutely, against oneself. Collatinus struggles, with at first only partial success, "to blow / The grief away that stops his answer so":

Lo, here, the hopeless merchant of this loss,
With head declin'd, and voice damm'd up
with woe,
With sad set eyes, and wretched arms across,
From lips new waxen pale begins to blow
The grief away that stops his answer so:
    But, wretched as he is, he strives in vain;
What he breathes out his breath drinks up
again.

As through an arch the violent roaring tide
Outruns the eye that doth behold his haste,
Yet in the eddy boundeth in his pride
Back to the strait that forc'd him on so fast;
In rage sent out, recall'd in rage, being past:
Even so his sighs, his sorrows, make a saw,
To push grief on and back the same grief
draw.

(11. 1660-73)

This is a fairly close approximation to the grief-stricken Hamlet of the first soliloquy, turning most of his anger upon himself. These two stanzas reveal that catatonic grief is far from a passionless state. Then, in Lucrece, Brutus makes perfectly explicit, in advising his friend, that the anger should be turned outward:

Why, Collatine, is woe the cure for woe?
Do wounds help wounds, or grief help
  grievous deeds?
Is it revenge to give thyself a blow
For his foul act by whom thy fair wife
  bleeds?
Such childish humour from weak minds
proceeds;
    Thy wretched wife mistook the matter so,
To slay herself, that should have slain her
  foe.

(11. 1821-27)

Shakespeare was not alone among creative writers in recognizing this harsh truth. A comparable episode occurs in Sidney's Arcadia. Amphialus, reacting to grief first with "a deepe sigh … seemed even to condemn him selfe, as though indeed his reproches were true. But howsoever the dulnes of Melancholy would have languishingly yeelded thereunto, his Courage (unused to such injuries) desired help of Anger. … "

The obvious therapy for melancholia, then, is to convert grief to its real, but disguised, source: anger. The psychologist Timothy Bright cautiously prescribes this remedy, though only after first recommending that the patient try reason, divinity, and avoidance of disturbances (Bright became a divine after a career in medicine):

And if no other perswasion will serve a vehement passion, of another sort is to be kindled, that may withdrawe that vain and foolish sorowe into some other extremity, as of anger. …
For although they both breed a dislike, yet that proceedeth of other cause, rebateth the force of it which first gave occasion, and as one pinne is driven out with another, so the later may expell the former... 25

This is, except for the caution, the advice of Malcolm to the stunned Macduff. Like Hamlet, Macduff is first stricken by his own unworthiness rather than anger toward Macbeth. He refers to himself as "sinful Macduff (IV.iii.224). Malcolm tries to persuade the thane to break out of his torpor and express his real grievance—first of all merely to "give sorrow words." Then Malcolm speaks the lines that represent the outstanding insight of Renaissance psychotherapy: "Be this the whetstone of your sword; let grief / Convert to anger; blunt not the heart, enrage it" (IV.iii.228-229). Changing from the blunted to the enraged heart, and converting grief to anger—these represent the progress of Hamlet from self-reviling muteness to the consciously and accurately enraged Hamlet of the last scenes. To recount this progress would be to tell the play; I can here point only to a few crucial speeches and episodes.

When we first see Hamlet, he is almost catatonic in his melancholia. We learn from him that he sighs and weeps (recommended, yet superficial, ways of relieving grief), but he speaks almost not at all to other people. His hostility to his parents is expressed only obliquely, sometimes in asides and in ironic and punning comments.26 Irony is of course a disciplined, intellectual rather than emotional, form of expressing anger. It does not ease the heart; and Hamlet later in the second scene, at the end of his first soliloquy, seems to apprehend an important fact about his grief: "It is not, nor it cannot come to good.——/ But break my heart, for I must hold my tongue" (I.ii.158-159). The body of the soliloquy does outwardly direct some anger—toward his mother's behavior—but it is spoken only to himself. In speaking to his mother, he is coldly courteous. The tone of the soliloquy and its principal direction point to self-punishment. It is not his mother whom he wishes to destroy but himself:

O, that this too too solid flesh would melt,
Thaw, and resolve itself into a dew!
Or that the Everlasting had not fix'd
His canon 'gainst self-slaughter!
(I.ii.129-132)

In Hamlet's second soliloquy (II.ii.575-634) the anger is much more evident. In fact, the soliloquy is his most ranting one. He is beginning to feel, though not to express to others, the fullness of his anger: "Bloody, bawdy villain! / Remorseless, treacherous, lecherous, kindless villain!" Significantly, however, almost all of the abusive language of the speech is still directed against himself. He is "a rogue and peasant slave," "a dull and muddy-mettled rascal," "an ass." But he is much more alive than he was in the dull grief of the first soliloquy. He may be angry mainly with himself, but he is at least consciously trying to whip himself into a perception of the emotion that underlies his melancholia. Anger, though misdirected, has come very much to the surface.

In Hamlet's progress from grief to anger, the "To be, or not to be" soliloquy (III.i.56-88) is crucial. After it is spoken, Hamlet seems capable of venting his anger upon Ophelia, though only indirectly upon Claudius (who overhears the veiled threats but is not, strictly speaking, addressed as an enemy). The soliloquy is usually interpreted as a contemplation of suicide. It is certainly, but not totally, that. Hamlet is still more grieved than angered, more intent upon punishing himself than upon punishing others. But we should observe that the second line of the speech turns to a subject somewhat different from the more famous first line:

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.
"Suffer," or "bear," as opposed to "take arms," becomes the key word of the rest of the soliloquy. Indeed, the speech is thoroughly meaningful only if we take it to express Hamlet's growing awareness that his one hope (Heaven is not yet seen as "ordinant") is to change from passiveness to angry activity. It is a debate, not simply whether to be or not to be, but whether to "bear" or to do. "For who would bear the whips and scorns of time … ?" "Who would fardels bear … ?" Only fear of the future "makes us rather bear those ills we have." Significantly, much of the grievance is directed outward: against the oppressor, the proud man, unrequited love, the law, the insolence of office, and the suffering of the patient man. From this point onward Hamlet is much less patient. His "danger" is becoming overt. Within a few lines he is lashing against Ophelia and women, and we thereby are becoming aware, as is Hamlet himself, of where his true hostility lies.

The anger is against his mother, though it is first mis-directed against Ophelia and all women. By the end of III.ii, Hamlet is no longer a victim of melancholia, precisely because he has turned the frightening force of his hatred upon the one person who has most cruelly betrayed him and his father. Here, incidentally, one must radically depart from the Oedipal theory. To assume that the Prince resents his father, one must disregard not only Renaissance psychology but the most emotional passages of the play. Perhaps for this reason the psychoanalytical critics, including Ernest Jones (the best of them), are indifferent to Hamlet's recovery from mental distress. One can account for this recovery only through the content of the emotional speeches and their change of hostile direction from Hamlet to his mother. The elder Hamlet never, even after Hamlet's hostility has come to full consciousness, is spoken of unlovingly.

"Now could I drink hot blood" (III.ii.408). In this passionate declaration Hamlet is still speaking only to himself, but there is no doubt of the completeness with which he has transferred his loathing from himself to his mother. He could now, if it were not for being unnatural, become like Nero. When we next see him with his mother, in the great closet scene (III.iv), he speaks no longer to himself but to her. The scene is dramatically, perhaps, the most successful in the play. Except for the soliloquies, it contains Hamlet's most heartfelt lines. In fact, it is the only scene in the play in which Hamlet talking to others is as impressive as Hamlet talking to himself. It is this, I believe, because it is essentially dealing with the same theme as the soliloquies: Hamlet's anger. But it is less subtle and interesting than the soliloquies because the anger is not so painfully disguised.

Even here, however, Hamlet must—for the last time—struggle against his impulse to suppress his true feelings. The struggle is now a brief one and occurs only because the Ghost appears and warns him to comfort his mother. The Ghost, who (very much like the early Hamlet) has "a countenance more in sorrow than in anger," does not share Hamlet's murderous hatred of his mother; indeed, it is partially the Ghost's command that has kept Hamlet from more promptly converting his grief to anger. The Ghost now looks at Hamlet in a way almost to redirect his emotion to tears rather than anger:

Do not look upon me,
Lest with this piteous action you convert
My stern effects; then what I have to do
Will want true colour, tears perchance for blood.

(III.iv.127-130)

The hesitancy, however, does not last. Hamlet does not kill his mother, but he speaks to her with "words like daggers" and with brutal, sexually specific candor. By the end of IV.iv, there is no question as to his commitment: "O, from this time forth, / My thoughts be bloody, or be nothing worth" (IV.iv.65-66).

The importance to Hamlet of the closet scene has been recognized by John E. Hankins, who calls the scourging of Gertrude almost a "conversion" for the Prince:
Nowhere after this scene does Hamlet show the same bitterness that he had earlier expressed. Even in his subsequent resolve to kill the King, he seems animated by a desire for justice rather than by vengeful hatred. ... The emotional catharsis of his experience has given him a certain serenity of spirit which he has not felt at any earlier time in the play.  

But Hamlet does not (occasion does not permit it) entirely lose his anger; and one may well ask what effect such an emotion would have upon a final Renaissance estimate of the hero. Although anger was a dangerous passion, it had its defenders, particularly those who recognized that there was no such state as a lack of passion, and that if a cause for anger existed, it was hazardous and foolish to suppress the emotion. Pierre Charron writes, typically, of the danger of "smothering" choler:

There are some that smother their choler within, to the end it breake not forth, and that they may seeme wise and moderate; but they fret themselves inwardly, and offer themselves a greater violence than the matter is worth. It is better to chide a little, and to vent the fire, to the end it be not everardent and painful within. ... All diseases that appeare openly are the lighter, and then are most dangerous when they rest hidden with a counterfet health.

The quotation is an apposite one, for the central image in the play is the opening of a hidden disease. Montaigne speaks to much the same effect, and with his refreshing and prophetic good sense:

I would rather perswade a man, though somewhat out of season, to give his boy a wherret on the eare, then to dissemble this wise, sterne or severe countenance, to vex and fret his minde. And I would rather make show of my passions, then smother them to my cost: which being vented and exprest, become more languishing and weake: Better it is to let its pointe worke outwardly, then bend it against our selves.

There may also be present in *Hamlet* an endorsement of what Hiram Haydn has called the "ireful virtues" as opposed to the Stoic virtues in the movement which he proposes under the name of the Counter-Renaissance. Certainly in all of Shakespeare’s four major tragedies there are extended, and usually persuasive, passages defending an aggressive rather than passive confronting of grief. In *King Lear*, which alone we have not considered, the King spends much effort in deciding between patience (involving grief and tears) and wrathful revenge. It does not matter to the Tightness of his conclusion that he is actually unable to take revenge:

You see me here, you gods, a poor old man,  
As full of grief as age; wretched in both!  
If it be you that stirs these daughters' hearts  
Against their father, fool me not so much  
To bear it tamely; touch me with noble anger,  
And let not women's weapons, water-drops,  
Stain my man's cheeks!  

(II.iv.275-281)

Shakespeare, unlike the moral Spenser of Book II of *The Faerie Queene*, did not decisively condemn noble anger.

Are we, after all, to assume that the intolerable suffering of a tragic hero is better than the display of anger? Is anger against oneself really better than anger against others? If we so conclude, we must condemn Hamlet and his final, healthy self in a world worthy of anger. Hamlet in the last scene *is* angry, furiously angry. The good nature and fairness he has shown to Laertes and the King is mightily abused, and he reacts with anger no longer toward himself but toward the aggressors.
He does, however, show intermittently what Hankins rightly calls "a certain serenity of spirit." And because the religious motif is so strong in the final scene, one hesitates to ascribe his serenity primarily to psychological recovery. Critics have written at length about the "regeneration" of Hamlet, and by this they mean his spiritual, not his psychological, well-being. Perhaps the two are not so disparate as we make them today, notably in literary criticism. Perhaps the only kind of religious acceptance that counts dramatically is that achieved with a clear mind. A Hamlet destroyed during the depths of his melancholia would scarcely be a tragic hero. We should also not forget that only the last scene shows a religiously serene Hamlet. His psychological recovery has occurred safely before this time.

But I do not wish to arouse the anger of the religious critics (many of whom would do well to sample the efforts of Elizabethan divines to treat melancholia). All that I seek to achieve in this essay is a renewed respect for the psychological view of Hamlet, without in any way minimizing the importance of a religious view, here and in much great tragedy. The psychological view, particularly if the sufferer achieves new insight, can lead to emotions comparable to those claimed by the religious view. Man can, after all, win his tragic way to wisdom not merely through resignation to God's will, but also through self-knowledge, through understanding his own hidden thoughts and feelings. Hamlet, at once the most religious and most intelligent of Shakespeare's heroes, does both.

Notes

1 A good Renaissance diagnosis is made by Lily B. Campbell, Shakespeare's Tragic Heroes: Slaves of Passion (New York, 1952), Ch. xii. More modern diagnoses will be cited later.

2 Shakespearean Tragedy (New York, 1960), p. 103. This, in general, is the opinion of scholars like J. Q. Adams, T. M. Parrott, and J. Dover Wilson.


10 An Exposition upon the Lords Prayer, in Works, p. 406. See also

11 III.i.173-175; V.ii.230. All Shakespeare references are to The Complete Plays and Poems of William Shakespeare, ed. W.A. Neilson and C. J. Hill (Boston, 1942).


Recommended by Burton, p. 482; Coeffeteau, pp. 343-345.


This is suggested, but without application to *Hamlet*, by Ruth Leila Anderson in her pioneering study, *Elizabethan Psychology and Shakespeare's Plays* (Iowa City, 1927), p. 91. Laertes is effectively cited by Miss Campbell (p. 115) as a youth who successfully converts his grief to anger.


Later he is to resort to the "antic disposition," which permits him freedom to insult others. I suspect that the need for expressing anger, and not hysteria or caginess, is the real reason for the antic disposition.

*The Character of Hamlet and Other Essays* (Chapel Hill, 1941), pp. 51-52.

*Of Wisdome*, trans. S. Lennard (London, 1625), p. 564. Moreover, the irascible power was generally considered to be more desirable than the concupiscible (including grief). See Coeffeteau, pp. 28-29.


Anger is of course not the solution to Lear's mental suffering. He is not a melancholiac. The Alcibiades episode in *Timon of Athens* (III.v) also vindicates anger as opposed to "bearing."

The strongest interpretation is that of J. A. Bryant, Jr., *Hippolyta's View. Some Christian Aspects of Shakespeare's Plays* (Lexington, 1960), Ch. viii. See also

I try to bring the two together in my article "Hamlet and the Restless Renaissance," *Shakespearean Essays* (Knoxville, Tenn., 1964). Therein, in fact, I argue that a goodly part of Hamlet's self-deprecation has a
religious (as well as psychological) basis.

Carroll Camden (essay date 1964)


[In the following essay, Camden argues that Ophelia's madness is largely precipitated by her unrequited love for Hamlet, rather than her father's death.]

The character of Ophelia seems to have been puzzling to many critics who have written about the play. As a minor personage of the tragedy, she has not received the careful analysis accorded Hamlet, Gertrude, or Claudius, or even Laertes, Horatio, or Polonius. Her role in the play is not clear to critical writers who have attempted to answer the many questions which arise about Ophelia's relations with her father and with Hamlet—questions which must be answered if her madness is to be explained. Is her madness occasioned by her father's death? by her rejected love for Hamlet? or by both, in varying degrees?

The romantic critics apparently felt that the less said about Ophelia the better. "What shall be said of her? for eloquence is mute before her!" asks Mrs. Jameson. Hazlitt considers that she "is a character almost too exquisitely touching to be dwelt upon", and calls her a "flower too soon faded". Strachey writes, "There is more to be felt than to be said in the study of Ophelia's character just because she is a creation of such perfectly feminine proportions and beauty". And Bradley believes that in her fate we have "an element, not of deep tragedy, but of pathetic beauty, which makes the analysis of her character seem almost a desecration". 1

Ophelia has received better treatment than this, of course, and she deserves better. She is not just the "poor wispy Ophelia" which Katherine Mansfield would make her, but a tenderhearted, delicate-minded young girl, well reared in proper obedience to her father, and experiencing what is apparently her first introduction to the bittersweet delights of love. And yet her tragedy seems to me to have been misinterpreted by a long array of critics, who have emphasized that her madness is due chiefly to the death of her father. According to John Draper, Ophelia's madness "comes about … because that father, whom she loved so dearly, came to a sudden and shocking end". L. L. Schücking, after remarking that "Grief at her father's sudden and unexplained death has unbalanced her mind", argues that any modern spectator who thinks that her madness is due to the broken relations with Hamlet is confuted by Shakespeare's making Claudius "expressly state that her madness is due to Polonius' death". Rebecca West goes so far as to say, "No line in the play suggests that she felt either passion or affection for Hamlet". In the last century, Roderick Benedix writes of Polonius' death as serving a dramatic purpose, "inasmuch as it is the cause of Ophelia's madness", but at the same time he perceives that "No girl becomes insane because her father dies, least of all Ophelia. …" Even Laurence Babb, although he notes the resemblance between the madness of Ophelia and that of the Jailer's daughter in The Two Noble Kinsmen, and though he believes that the "lovesick maidens of the early Stuart drama" were influenced by Ophelia, can write that it is not unrequited love which is chiefly responsible for Ophelia's condition but rather "grief for her father's death". Despite these pronouncements, as well as that of G. L. Kittredge that "it is the mysterious tragedy of her father's death that has driven her mad", I believe it can be shown that the overriding cause of Ophelia's madness is clearly spelled out in the play; it is more "the pangs of despiz'd love" which cause her tragic fate than the death of Polonius. 2

The first we see of Ophelia is when she receives some parting advice from her brother, as Laertes prepares to go abroad. He thinks of himself as a worldly-wise young man explaining the chief pitfall which a green girl is likely to encounter in the life at court. He warns her that Hamlet is merely playing with her affections and that she must not consider his attentions as more than "a violet in the youth of primy nature … the perfume and suppliance of a minute". And he continues by saying that as the body becomes of age, the mind and soul which service the temple of the body also grow and cause youth to be attracted toward the opposite sex. Laertes cautions her to realize that her own feelings are somewhat in this category, since "the chariest maid is

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prodigal enough" when opportunity is afforded her, and "youth to itself rebels". Of course Laertes' advice is shallow; he seemingly judges Hamlet to be a man like himself. And Ophelia is perceptively aware of his shallowness as she reminds him in sisterly fashion to heed his own warnings; then Laertes suddenly remembers that he is in a hurry to depart. But through this speech Laertes may well have aroused what he sought to allay, by focusing Ophelia's thoughts on the subject of love, already kindled by her own inchoate desires.

Polonius contributes to Ophelia's absorption in matters of love as he indicates how the senses of youth are easily inflamed. She must not take the heat of Hamlet's desire as true love. Polonius then delivers the blow which has blighted the lives of many girls as he tells his daughter that she must break off with Hamlet and never again talk with him.

A further shock to Ophelia, one full of dramatic irony, occurs offstage when Hamlet bursts into her boudoir. Having been warned by her brother and her father of the sexual frailties of youth, she finds some support for their remarks in the actions of Hamlet in her closet. She fears that Hamlet is mad for love, and if so he is mad for the love that she has been forbidden to give him—she is the cause of Hamlet's madness. We need not pause to consider the real significance of Hamlet's actions here. It suffices that Hamlet's behavior gives her every reason to believe her father right in his diagnosis of the cause of Hamlet's madness. It is a species of irony that the prescription given by Polonius seems to bring about Hamlet's pretended madness but actually contributes to Ophelia's real madness. When Ophelia reports Hamlet's conduct, Polonius sees that Hamlet suffers from "the very ecstasy of love", but never suspects that in following his orders Ophelia is about to succumb to the same ecstasy, "whose violent property fordoes itself and leads the will to desperate undertakings". Polonius is quick to tell his daughter that when she "did repel his letters and denied his access" to her she caused Hamlet to run mad; but since he is a self-absorbed busybody who regards his daughter as a tool, he gives no thought to the effect that all this will have on Ophelia. Indeed, a further irony lies in the actual words of Polonius as he gives to the King and Queen his prognosis of the disease in Hamlet:

I prescripts gave her
That she should lock herself from his resort,
Admit no messengers, receive no tokens.
Which done, she took the fruits of my advice;
And he, repulsed—a short tale to make—

Fell into a sadness, then into a fast,
Thence to a watch, thence into a weakness,
Thence to a lightness, and, by this declension,
Into the madness wherein now he raves,
And we all mourn for.

(II. ii. 142-151)

The defective effect of Ophelia's madness to come has the same cause; Polonius' prescripts have their effect on Ophelia too. Throughout the play, indeed, the appearance of Hamlet's pretended madness is contrasted with the reality of Ophelia's madness.

The next shock to the tender sensibilities of Ophelia is the get-thee-to-a-nunnery scene. She now believes that she herself is the immediate source of Hamlet's madness. She believes, too, that Hamlet loves her; and her actions, if not her words, indicate that she has more than warm feelings for him, as witness the patience with which she listens to Hamlet during his mad speech. Yet when she meets him to return his tokens of love, he tells her, "I did love you once. … You should not have believed me. … I loved you not." She must wonder whether her father and brother were not right after all. To complete the disillusionment, Hamlet uses offensive language to her, language that no sensitive girl could endure with equanimity. He asks her if she is chaste, and
insults her further with comment on her affected walk and speech, her use of cosmetics, her "wantonness". Though the language is general enough in its reflections on womankind, and though it is used for the benefit of the hidden Claudius and Polonius, yet the tone is ill-mannered and is an affront which Ophelia would feel deeply.

Commentators also wonder whether or not Hamlet really loved Ophelia. But the point here is that whether he did or not, Ophelia thought he did. In his letter to her he wrote: "That I love thee best, O most best, believe it. … Thine evermore". When in the scene just examined Hamlet says, "I did love you once". Ophelia replies, "Indeed, my lord, you made me believe so". And when Hamlet retires from the scene, Ophelia speaks of herself as being "of ladies most deject and wretched". That she returned the love is clearly indicated as she lets the audience know in a soliloquy what is running through her mind, characterizing herself as one "that sucked the honey of his music vows". Vows and words of love are music only in the ears of those who return the feelings of love.

In the play scene, the relations between Hamlet and Ophelia remain much the same as in the scene just discussed. Hamlet continues to use bawdy language; Ophelia modestly declines the obscene implications of his question, "Shall I lie in your lap?" and seems not to understand some of the conversation. But when the Prologue enters and Hamlet puns on the word "show", she tells him he is naughty. Several lines further, Ophelia comments on the sharpness of his repartee, only to receive the reply, "It would cost you a groaning to take off my edge". Although Hamlet's language may have been calculated to convince Claudius that he is mad for love, it certainly was the sort to disturb even more the delicate balance of the susceptible girl who saw herself to blame.

Ophelia's mind is further agitated in the same scene. When Hamlet asks whether the actor is speaking a true prologue or giving a "posy" for a ring, she agreeably replies that it certainly is brief, only to hear Hamlet's "As woman's love". His remark is usually glossed as being his comment on the conduct of his mother, and this interpretation may well be correct. But Ophelia must think that Hamlet is speaking of her own conduct toward him.

When we next hear of Ophelia, it is to learn of her madness. The Gentleman prepares us for her entrance by describing her actions for the Queen. According to him Ophelia talks much of her father and says there are deceptions in the world. She should know, since she has practised some herself in lying to Hamlet concerning her father's whereabouts, and she has had others practised on her by Hamlet. Her first words upon entering are, "Where is the beauteous majesty of Den-mark?" Surely she is not talking of her father here, since the words fit neither what we know of Polonius nor what a girl would say of a father who fails to understand her. Nor is there any reason why Gertrude should be the subject of her question. Rather it is to Hamlet that her words apply, whom she has already characterized as

The glass of fashion and the mould of form,
The observed of all observers, quite, quite down!
And I, of ladies most deject and wretched,
That suck'd the honey of his music vows,
Now see that noble and most sovereign reason,
Like sweet bells jangled, out of tune and harsh;
That unmatch'd form and feature of blown youth
Blasted with ecstasy.

(III. i. 161-168)
Hamlet, then, is the "beauteous majesty"; it is upon Hamlet that her mind in its madness dwells. And the first of the song-snatches she sings is about "true love".

How should I your true love know
From another one?
By his cockle hat and staff,
And his sandal shoon.

Surely no one contends that Polonius is her true love. And when the Queen inquires the import of the song, Ophelia asks her to listen to the next lines:

He is dead and gone, lady,
He is dead and gone;
At his head a grass-green turf,
At his heels a stone.

The Queen starts to say something, but again Ophelia asks her to listen:

White was his shroud as the mountain
snow,—
Larded with sweet flowers;
Which to the grave did go
With true-love showers.

(IV. v. 23-39)

The first four lines are apparently part of a traditional verse. The other lines have no connection with this Walsingham poem as printed in the Garland of Good Will or the version in the Bodleian manuscript. It is possible, however, that the three quatrains were part of a single poem. Whether they were or not is unimportant; what is important is that both the first and third quatrains tell of true love and would naturally be linked in Ophelia's mind with Hamlet. Perhaps, then, in her mind it is Hamlet who is "dead and gone" since he is dead and gone for her. The point is that Polonius makes an unlikely candidate to appear among verses on true love.

The King has already made his entrance; he now greets Ophelia: "How do you, pretty lady?" She responds to the greeting in the conventional fashion, scarcely noticing him. Then she speaks a line referring to a moral tale designed to teach children to be kind and generous to the poor, and follows it with the words: "Lord, we know what we are, but know not what we may be. God be at your table." The King thinks her ramblings to be "conceit upon her father". That can hardly be. The moral tale has no apparent application; and knowing what we are but not what we may become wonderfully expresses both Ophelia's former concern over Hamlet's condition and her own distressing state.

Of course we should probably make little or nothing of Ophelia's non sequiturs in this scene. To derive intelligent meaning from them would be to group ourselves with others who remark her ramblings and "botch the words up to fit their own thoughts". Yet in apparent reply to the King's words Ophelia rejects his interpretation and recites sixteen lines of immodest verse on sexual love, the effect of which underlines strongly the chief cause of her madness: "Pray you, let's have no words of this; but when they ask you what it means, say you this":

    Tomorrow is Saint Valentine's day,
    All in the morning betime,
    And I a maid at your window,
To be your Valentine.
Then up he rose, and donn'd his clothes,
And dupp'd the chamber-door;
Let in the maid, that out a maid
Never departed more. …
By Gis and by Saint Charity,
Alack, and fie for shame!
Young men will do't, if they come to't;
By cock, they are to blame.
Quoth she, before you tumbled me,
You promised me to wed.
So would I ha' done, by yonder sun,
An thou hadst not come to my bed.

(IV. v. 48-66)

These coarse and uninhibited lines are the sort which might unconsciously and naturally float to the top of Ophelia's muddled mind if her thoughts had been dwelling on Hamlet's love and on possible marriage to him. As by certain dreams "may we conjecture of the sinnes of the heart: because what we conceive or practice in the day will be corruptly dreamed of in the night", so when one mentally disturbed speaks "things in doubt, that carry but half sense", we may rightly judge the sources of her perturbations to lie in her secret desires.

Ophelia now indeed speaks of her father, saying that she cannot help weeping "to think they should lay him i' the cold ground". After she makes her exit, the King repeats his first diagnosis, saying, "this is the poison of deep grief; it springs all from her father's death". But of course Claudius has his own axe to grind since he wishes to stir Laertes up to ridding him of Hamlet. We can allow the statement that Ophelia's words and actions spring from deep grief, but not all from the death of Polonius.

When Ophelia reenters later in the scene, her brother is on stage; as he sees her madness he speaks of her in extravagant terms of sorrow, concluding somewhat enigmatically that human nature is delicate in matters of love, and when it is so "it sends some previous instance of itself after the thing it loves". Immediately following the words of Laertes, Ophelia sings more snatches of songs. The first indeed sounds as though her father is in her mind. Yet if so, the last line of the quatrains as it is printed in F is curious: "Fare you well, my dove!" Are these not rather the words Ophelia might use to Hamlet? Her next little song ("You must sing a-down a-down, An you call him a-down-a") might suit anyone: Laertes or Claudius, as well as Polonius or Hamlet. Ophelia comments: "O, how the wheel becomes it! It is the false steward, that stole his master's daughter." We can only conjecture the antecedent of it; but the story of the false steward does have something to do with love, and nothing to do with a dead father. The language of flowers follows, though there are no violets since "they withered all when my father died". But the next snatch ("For bonny sweet Robin is all my joy") again is from a song of love. The last song must refer to Polonius, since in it occur the lines, "No, no, he is dead" and "His beard was as white as snow".

The remaining act of Ophelia's pitiful tragedy takes place off stage, and we learn of it from the beautifully poetic account of the Queen. According to Gertrude, to put it prosaically, Ophelia crowned herself with a garland of oddly assorted flowers and weeds, climbed a willow tree, and fell into a stream when the branch on which she sat broke. She floated for a while, continuing to sing "snatches of old tunes", then sank to "muddy death". Note that even at her watery end, the "envious sliver" which let her fall is that of a willow, a tree linked in Shakespeare and elsewhere in Elizabethan literature with unrequited love.

Of course it seems quite reasonable that Ophelia would have some degree of affection for her father. And obviously, too, his death was a traumatic experience for her. Yet I believe that Katherine Mansfield is quite perceptive in her brief analysis of the relationship between father and daughter. Concerning Polonius she says,
"Who can believe that a solitary violet withered when that silly old Pomposity died? And who can believe that Ophelia really loved him, and wasn't thankful to think how peaceful breakfast would be without his preaching." The death of Polonius, then, may well have been only the last in a series of shocks to her basically weak personality. First the love that Hamlet had declared for her, then the warning of her brother and her father, her father's orders not to receive Hamlet or talk with him or accept messages or gifts from him, Hamlet's visiting her closet and indicating that she herself is responsible for his madness, the return of Hamlet's tokens and his unseemly language to her in the nunnery scene, his refusal of her, his gross proposal to her (though perhaps spoken facetiously or to confuse Claudius) and his indecent speech at the play scene, together with the constant references made in her presence throughout the tragedy to such matters as "a fashion and a toy in blood", "blazes", "mad for love", "desperate undertakings", "are you honest?" "I loved you not", "believe none of us", "make your wantonness your ignorance", "country matters", "lie between a maid's legs", "be not you ashamed to show", "brief... as woman's love"—these are the overt causes of Ophelia's madness. Though every kind of suggestion has been made to interpret practically every line in the play, we can be thankful that no one has suggested an Electra complex in Ophelia; she was not in love with Polonius. Thomas Hanmer, early in the eighteenth century, clearly stated the principle: "It is not often that young women run mad for the loss of their fathers". Young people can usually regard the death of a parent with some degree of equanimity, but the death of their own prospects is quite another matter.

The parallel of Ophelia's madness and that of the Jailer's daughter in *The Two Noble Kinsmen* is very apt; and it strengthens the belief that Ophelia is "distract" from unrequited love. Early in the play the Jailer's daughter, feeling her madness coming on, says: "Let not my sense unsettle, Lest I should drown or stab or hang myself. Later in the play she rushes into the water ("sought the flood") but is saved by her Wooer. Further, she sings snatches of many songs, as does Ophelia. One of the songs has the refrain "Hey, nonny, nonny, nonny". She forgets one song but remembers that its refrain is "Down a, down a". She says she knows the song "Bonny Robin", and sings "Willow, willow, willow", the song of unrequited love also sung by Desdemona. Like Ophelia, too, she frequently talks in a bawdy fashion and asks the Wooer, thinking him to be Palamon, to go to bed with her. Interestingly also, although it is specifically stated that she is mad for love, she too talks of her father's death and says that when he dies she will gather flowers for his burial; but "then she sang nothing but 'Willow, willow'", and instead of a coronet of weeds she makes rings of the rushes and speaks to them such pretty posies of love as "Thus our true love's tied" and "This you may lose, not me". Later she remarks, "We maids that have our lives perish'd, crack'd to pieces with love, we shall come there and do nothing all day long but pick flowers with Proserpine. Then will I make Palamon a Nosegay." She speaks of hell and says that "if one be mad, or hang or drown themselves, thither they go..." When the Doctor is asked to diagnose her sickness, he states that she is suffering from love melancholy, which he believes can be cured only if the Wooer, as Palamon, makes love with her.

The Elizabethans, further, would have been prepared to accept Ophelia as a girl suffering from the effects of love, erotic melancholy (erotomania), or a fit of the mother. They knew that "the passive condition of woman kind is subject vnto more diseases and of other sortes and natures then men are". They recognized that "the diverse and violent perturbations which affict the mind of the Passionate Lover, are the causes of greater mischieves, then any other passion of the mind whatsoever". "Love is the ground and Principali cause of all our Affections, and the Abstract of all the Passions and perturbations of the minde. ..." Furthermore, Doctor James Ferrand continues, erotic melancholy is particularly common in women; they are "farre more subject to this passion, and more cruelly tormented with it, then men are". And he notes that "daily experience affords us Examples great store of Women, that are ready to run Mad for Love. ..." André du Laurens and John Bishop continue in the same vein, the latter emphasizing the suicidal tendencies of those suffering from erotic melancholy; he states that he believes this disease "to be of all other most painful: seeing that so many [women] do willingly ninne into euerlasting paines of hell fire, by cruelly murthering them selues, that they may thereby escape and rid them from the broyling brendes of Cupide. ..."
Ophelia exhibits many of the classical symptoms of *passio hysterica* brought on by *erotomania*. She is mad, cries "hem" to clear her throat because of a feeling of choking or suffocation, beats her heart to relieve the sensation of oppression around it, weeps, prattles constantly, sings snatches of old songs, is distracted and has a depraved imagination, and ends her life by drowning. It is possible that the drowning may not have been deliberate, but at least Ophelia made no attempt to save herself. Though the priest says she is allowed her virgin rites, yet the rites are "maimed" because "her death was doubtful". Dr. Jorden warns that many good physicians are deceived by the symptoms of the disease (such as "suffocation in the throat, … convulsions, hickockes, laughing, singing, weeping, crying, &c") believing them "to proceed from some metaphysicall power, when in deede … they are meerely naturali."

Similarly, Dr. Ferrand speaks of the person suffering from *erotomania*: "For you shall see him now very jocund and laughing and presently within a moment he falls a weeping, and is extreame sad: then by againe he entertaines himselfe with some pleasant merry conceipts or other. … These Perturbations proceed from the Diversity of those objects they fancy to themselves. … To this we may adde their excessive talking. …" Finally, in treating the subject of young girls ready for marriage, Dr. Ferrand gives this warning: "For the cure of which Disease [Hippocrates] prescribes speedy Marriages otherwise it is to be feared, that through Madnesse and Impatience, they will make away themselves, either by drowning or hanging; falsely persuading themselves, that by these Remedies, … being very sure ones, and as they conceive, the best they can finde; they shall set a period to their miseries."

Whatever the exact bature of Ophelia's malady of love, whether it is pure *erotomania* or *passio hysterica* brought on by lovesickness, the symptoms which she exhibits are so clearly portrayed and most of them so easily recognized that the Elizabethan audience, we have reason to suppose, would at least see Ophelia as a girl suffering physically and mentally the pangs of rejected love.

Notes


4 Mansfield, p. 182.


6 *Othello* IV.iii. 26-57. See *Much Ado* II. i. 124-126, "I offered him my company to a willow-tree, either to make him a Garland, as being forsaken, or to bind him up a rod. … "; *Merchant of Venice* V. i. 9-10; *Twelfth Night* I. v. 287-288.

7 It is interesting that this occurrence is duplicated in *Der Bestrafte Brudermond*—a play in which all agree that Ophelia is mad for love—where Ophelia mistakes Phantasmo for her sweetheart and suggests that they go to bed together.


Du Laurens, pp. 117-118; Bishop, fol. 52v.

Ferrand, pp. 11, 94-96.


Ferrand, pp. 97, 107-110.

It is rather interesting to note, though perhaps of no significance, that in the discussion of the remedies of love Burton quotes the line, "Young men will do it when they come to it", but without reference to *Hamlet* (p. 736).

### Theodore Lidz (essay date 1975)


In the essay that follows Lidz analyzes Hamlet's madness, including his real and feigned insanities and the conclusions he reaches while in these states.

The members of the parental generation, having given their advice and orders to Hamlet, Laertes, Ophelia, and Fortinbras, start spying on them in the second act. Two months have elapsed since Hamlet swore to avenge his father; but he has not yet moved "with wings as swift / As meditation or the thoughts of love" (I, v, 29-30). Claudius is still alive, and Hamlet's emotional balance has become precarious during the interlude. We may or may not be aware of his instability, depending on how the role is acted. Indeed, we must rely upon reports from those who are closest to him to learn of the worsening of his condition. In the very first scene of the second act, Ophelia rushes to tell her father that she has just been frightened while sewing in her closet by the

| Lord Hamlet, with his doublet all unbraced; |
| No hat upon his head; his stockings foul'd; |
| Ungarter'd, and down-gyved to his ancle; |
| Pale as his shirt; his knees knocking each other; |
| And with a look so piteous in purport |
| As if he had been loosed out of hell |
| To speak of horrors, |

and she goes on to describe behavior strange enough to lead Polonius to believe:
This is the very ecstasy of love;  
Whose violent property fordoes itself  
And leads the will to desperate undertakings,  
As oft as any passion under heaven  
That does afflict our natures.

(II, i, 102-106)

Even though we know that Hamlet has planned to feign insanity, it seems strange that he does so by entering Ophelia's rooms in so disheveled a condition, or that he would befoul his stockings to carry out the pretense. Perhaps he seeks to hide the meaning of his embittered and melancholic behavior under the guise of being depressed over Ophelia's withdrawal of her affection, but it seems a cruel and deceitful way to treat his beloved. The obedient Ophelia has followed her father's injunctions and repelled Hamlet's letters and denied him access to her. Just at this critical juncture in Hamlet's life, she has let her father come between Hamlet and herself. Polonius is certain that these rebuffs have driven Hamlet mad, and he now hopes that a reconciliation between his daughter and the heir apparent may reclaim Hamlet's wits. His hopes are fortified when he reads the note that Hamlet has sent Ophelia, a confused expression of Hamlet's suffering and his undying love:

O dear Ophelia, I am ill at these numbers. I have not art to reckon my groans; but that I love thee best, O most best, believe it. Adieu.

Thine evermore, most dear lady, whilst this machine is to him, HAMLET

(II, ii, 119-123)

The message can be taken either as part of an exaggerated subterfuge or as a threat to commit suicide unless Ophelia relents.

Meanwhile, Gertrude and Claudius have become sufficiently concerned about Hamlet's condition to summon Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to court to distract their son and to find out what is troubling him. The king does not ask them to spy on their friend; rather, he requests them to "glean" whether anything "unknown afflicts him thus, / That, open'd, lies within our remedy" (II, ii, 17-18). Claudius, in greeting Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, tells them of Hamlet's melancholic state, terming it a "transformation," "Sith nor the exterior nor the inward man / Resembles that it was" (II, ii, 6-7).

When Polonius informs the king and queen that he has found the cause of Hamlet's indisposition, it is clear that all three are fully convinced that he is mad. Neither Claudius nor Gertrude takes exception to Polonius' direct statement, "Your noble son is mad" (II, ii, 92), though they are skeptical that it is because Ophelia has refused to see him that he fell into a sadness and finally into "the madness wherein now he raves" (II, ii, 149). Then, when Hamlet appears, Polonius "boards" him, and Hamlet seems neither mad nor even seriously melancholic. He uses the license afforded by his supposed madness to bait Polonius, to display his wit in playing with words and phrases. We have a brief "comic relief—a relief, literally, because our hero's mind seems very sharp indeed.

Shakespeare has here turned the more customary situation around: the audience is not laughing at the madman; instead, the madman is making his sane interrogator laughable. The trend is feebly apparent in the Saxo and Belleforest versions of the saga in which Amleth, the butt of the courtiers' tricks repeatedly turns the tables on them. Hamlet, however, is more clearly related to the "trickster" of various myths and to the jester, the fool who makes others look foolish.

Hamlet seems to realize that Polonius has prevented Ophelia from seeing him. He advises Polonius that "if the sun breed maggots in a dead dog" (II; ii, 180), he should keep his daughter out of the sun lest she conceive.
Polonius thinks Hamlet is "far gone" but considers "How pregnant sometimes his replies are! a happiness that often madness hits on, which reason and sanity could not so prosperously be delivered of (II, ii, 206-209). The audience now knows that Hamlet's intellect is as keen as ever; but then comes the parting exchange in which Shakespeare lets us know that despite his wit and his intact wits, Hamlet is in a precarious state. When Polonius bids him farewell, "My honourable lord, I will most humbly take leave of you" (II, ii, 210-211), Hamlet replies, "You cannot, sir, take from me any thing that I will more willingly part withal; except my life, except my life, except my life" (II, ii, 212-214).

When Hamlet first meets Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, he confirms his unwholesome state of mind. They admit that they are in the court because the king and queen have sent for them, and Hamlet does not need to ask why. He relieves them from betraying a secret by telling them it is because he has of late:

… but wherefore I know not,—lost all my mirth, forgone all custom of exercises; and indeed it goes so heavily with my disposition that this goodly frame, the earth, seems to me a sterile promontory; this most excellent canopy, the air, … appears no other thing to me than a foul and pestilent congregation of vapours. What a piece of work is man! how noble in reason! how infinite in faculty! in form and moving, how express and admirable! in action, how like an angel! in apprehension, how like a god! the beauty of the world! the paragon of animals! And yet, to me, what is this quintessence of dust? man delights not me;

(II, ii, 288-300)

A little later, however, he confides to them that his uncle-father and his aunt-mother are deceived, for "I am but mad north-north-west; when the wind is southerly, I know a hawk from a handsaw" (II, ii, 360-361). He is aware that he is being affected by the deceit and hostility of those around him. Shakespeare properly has Hamlet's mood and behavior fluctuate with the feelings aroused in him by those persons who are most significant to him.

The Incitement to Action

Hamlet, then, has been suffering. He has become a tormented soul struggling to survive in a world that has lost its meaning for him, and he scarcely cares if he survives or not. After two months, he has still to carry out his father's bidding. He has difficulty in keeping his mind from being tainted and contriving against his mother; killing his stepfather seems a secondary matter to him. Then, the traveling players—old friends of Hamlet's—arrive at Elsinore. Hamlet bids the First Player give them a foretaste of his artistry with a speech from a play Hamlet admired for its honesty and modesty, even though it "pleased not the million; 'twas caviare to the general" (II, ii, 416). In the speech, Aeneas tells Dido of Priam's slaughter: of how Pyrrhus avenged his father, Achilles; and of how a faithful queen, Hecuba, mourned her husband. While listening to the Player agonize about Priam and Hecuba, Hamlet is stimulated to move out of the inertia of his melancholy, his indecision, and his feelings that nothing matters to him. His misanthropic mood is apparent. When Polonius tells him that he will use the players "according to their desert," Hamlet chides him, "Use every man after his desert, and who should 'scape whipping?" (II, ii, 505-506). This remark led Freud in "Mourning and Melancholia" to write, "For there can be no doubt that if anyone holds and expresses to others an opinion of himself such as this (an opinion which Hamlet held both of himself and everyone else) he is ill, whether he is speaking the truth or whether he is being more or less unfair to himself." Thus, we have Freud's opinion of Hamlet's mental state at the close of Act II.

As soon as Hamlet is alone, he tells himself:

Oh what a rogue and peasant slave am I!
Is it not monstrous that this player here,
But in a fiction, in a dream of passion,
Could force his soul so to his own conceit
That from her working all his visage wann'd;
Tears in his eyes, distraction in's aspect,
A broken voice, and his whole function
suiting
With forms to his conceit? And all for
nothing!
For Hecuba?
What's Hecuba to him, or he to Hecuba,
That he should weep for her? What would he
do,
Had he the motive and the cue for passion
That I have?

(II, ii, 523-535)

He berates himself for being a "dull and muddy-mettled rascal," who is a "John-a-dreams, unpregnant of my cause" (II, ii, 541-542) and who, though

Prompted to my revenge by heaven and hell,
Must, like a whore, unpack my heart with
words,
And fall acursing, like a very drab.

(II, ii, 560-562)

While the First Player speaks, however, Hamlet conceives a way out of his uncertainty, a way to make certain that he has not, because of his melancholy, simply hallucinated the ghost's revelations or been tricked by an evil spirit. He has formulated his stratagem for gaining proof of Claudius' guilt: "The play's the thing / Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king" (II, ii, 580-581).

Although Hamlet is now ready to test Claudius and take measures to clear the corruption from the court, he remains uncertain whether it is worth taking "arms against a sea of troubles, / And by opposing end them?" (I, i, 59-60). One alternative is to retain his philosophic perspective and "suffer / The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune" (III, i, 57-58). Another is suicide.

To die,—to sleep,—
No more; and by a sleep to say we end
The heart-ache, and the thousand natural
shocks
That flesh is heir to,—'tis a consummation
Devoutly to be wish'd.

(III, i, 60-64)

He ponders that uniquely human problem, the existential dilemma of "to be, or not to be." He is not so obsessed with his father's murder that he must hasten to revenge. He would prefer to turn his back on the whole sorry mess. What does life hold for him? He can kill his uncle. If fortunate, he will assume the throne. But his mother's obliquity will remain with him. Why should he not be much possessed by death? Hamlet, as others who choose the negative answer when they weigh the worth of life and death, finds the balance weighted by his disillusionment with the person whose love was central to his well-being.
Hamlet is aware that he must leave off considering all sides of a question if he is to act heroically. He is considering more than his reasons for not ending his life when he tells himself:

Thus conscience does make cowards of us all,  
And thus the native hue of resolution  
Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought,  
And enterprises of great pith and moment  
With this regard their currents turn awry  
And lose the name of action.

(III, i, 83-88)

He is not the type of Renaissance hero whose life can readily be guided by the need for vengeance or power.

He has been schooled in contemplation. If he is to act, as he has sworn to the ghost he will, he must become impetuous. Later he will even praise rashness: "Our indiscretion sometimes serves us well / When our deep plots do fail" (V, ii, 8-9).

Notes

1 In his Heart of Hamlet, Bernard Grebanier is somehow able to assert that Hamlet neither is insane nor feigns insanity at any time during the play.

2 Hamlet's praise of this speech may seem misplaced, and many readers would tend to agree with Polonius, who is bored by it. However, Shakespeare was consistent in having a university student, Hamlet, admire a classic play. Shakespeare took as a model and improved a passage from Marlowe's Dido, Queen of Carthage, that may well have been written by Nash after Marlowe's death. It is far from a "modest" speech. However, the questionable artistic merit of the speech should not let us neglect its importance both in furthering the movement of Hamlet, and also in setting a mood by inveighing against that strumpet, Fortune.


4 Consciousness or inmost thought.

P. J. Aldus (essay date 1977)


[In the following excerpt, Aldus investigates the madness of Hamlet on a mythical level, exploring his "poetic "madness as a projection of Shakespeare himself and the prince as a paranoid schizophrenic"

POLONIUS Though this be madness, yet there is method in't.

... a happiness that often madness hits on, which reason and sanity could not so prosperously be delivered of.

Hamlet embodies an involved combination of many identities, but the awkward, sometimes cumbersome terminologies used here for them (e.g., King/Polonius/ Hamlet) scarcely help gain response to mythic character and action. The reductio ad absurdum, however accurate the term might be, would be a composite name stretching its length a third of a page.
The usual alternative, each figure accepted by name as literal character in a literal story, is even worse. But it will have been noticed that there has been here a compromise, awkward terminologies giving way from time to time to the simple 'literal' names. Readers probably share the feeling that this aspect of the study is unsatisfactory, for indeed any such use of the names *per se* is invitation to a literal perspective, the same problem that disturbed the responses of Greg, Wilson, Granville-Barker, Eliot, and others. Even with this limitation, which may have been Shakespeare's problem too, it may be that the inventive structure of the play makes acceptance of the complex character of Hamlet inescapable.

The difficulty was not enough to discourage Greg from the belief that *Hamlet* may be so powerful a poem as to be beyond the art of the stage, but possibly apprehensible through reading. Yet Shakespeare relied on a stage a large part of which was the full imaginative participation of much of an audience more sensitive than we to metaphoric implications in language, character, and patterns of action.

If so, our final problem is to attempt to set forth some approximating equivalent pattern which will allow fuller response to the shifting, blending identity that is the unrelenting unity of Hamlet's agony. Perhaps a brief review of 'madnesses' in Plato's sense of the term, lying at the heart of human experience, may be helpful towards a final understanding of Hamlet, of *Hamlet*, and of a major element in Shakespeare's invention.

By Plato's standard that the use of myths is part of invention *Hamlet* has not been found wanting. But, although marked by large interwoven patterns of extant myths and enriched by allusions to particular myths within these traditions, the play yet must provide another mode of invention if Shakespeare is to satisfy Plato's concept of the true poet: he must be able to make a myth within which all poetic powers show themselves, including the significant incorporation of the mythic past. He must be able to construct, as the whole, a metaphor that is total, a language for truth (as far as man may experience it) of a different kind than the rational.

So extraordinary is this kind of imitation that it can be apprehended only imperfectly and vaguely by the literal power of reason. It is beyond paraphrase, beyond rational equivalent; its quality can be approximated only by example, by a corresponding metaphoric statement, another myth; but this will yet be something different, for the only correlative to a myth is itself in the understanding of him who reads, and in dramatic myth who sees and hears it. Another way of trying to put this is to say that the *Hamlet* myth provides fullness of meaning to the extent that the private myth brought to the play corresponds to it, a private myth which at the same time must be a universal myth.

Such myth-making, says Plato, comes about in the poet who is 'possessed,' who is in a state of holy or divine madness. Such madness is not, or need not be, although it always seems metaphorically akin to, madness in the ordinary sense. An exploration of this element in *Hamlet* may help resolve the awkwardnesses in attempts here to convey the multiple-single character of Hamlet. Such inquiry will be clearer if it is approached by a brief reconsideration of Plato's definitions of several kinds of divine madness.

At this point it should be quite obvious that what we are about to consider has nothing to do with the quite irrelevant inquiry as to whether Hamlet is mad or feigns madness—a question that could become relevant if the point were raised whether Shakespeare wished to create a dramatic character representing one or the other state (or both, for that matter). As usually put, the question postulates a sane man (not a dramatic character) pretending to be mad, or a man once sane now mad; the assumption is extra-metaphoric, extra-poetic; it is predicated on the play as a literal action measurable by a mankind which is sane or 'normal.' Mythic man is, of course, if most uncomfortable company, quite normal in nature, however mad in conventional society.

Here madness will be approached in Plato's terms as a condition required for myth, or in Aristotle's terms as character good for the action of a drama. If the action requires madness, the poet supplies madness in whatever degree or form, when, and where it may be needed, just as he gives extra-mortal or extra-historical
creatures a 'local habitation and a name.'

All four of Plato's divine madnesses are extreme; they are ideal forms of human power represented by gods or agents of gods. Hamlet gives evidence in what he says and in action of being possessed by each of these forces. There is prophetic madness, lying finally, for example, in the *Oedipus* in Apollo, and directly evident in Teiresias, the blind seer, who too could have exclaimed, 'O, my prophetic soul!' There is the madness of divine healing: 'Again, where plagues and mightiest woes have bred in certain families, owing to some ancient blood-guiltiness, there madness has entered with holy prayers and rites, and by inspired utterances found a way of deliverance for those who are in need …' Hamlet is less cheerful; he curses the spite that he has been born to set evils right.

Of lust Plato intimates that, if one believes it to be a simple madness (i.e., an indivisible state of evil), one might accept it. But he says there is 'also a madness which is a divine gift … [this] madness of love is the greatest of heaven's blessings …' Hamlet is on a line between these compulsive twin states. He has lost the second (although he yearns for it), is slave to the first.

The fourth, poetic madness, is the most interesting in *Hamlet*, for it suggests, through Hamlet's character as poet/dramatist/actor (with all its associated powers) a special application of precisely these powers in Shakespeare as he invents the profoundly searching myth that enters us as audience at the same time that it is an endlessly receding vision. While there is no reason whatever to conjecture about Shakespeare's attitude towards himself, and even less what he may have been in terms of the madnesses of prophecy, healing, or love-lust (although he presumably expressed himself as to the last in the sonnets), there is no way of escaping his use of himself, just as he uses the Globe theatre, as a richly provocative element in *Hamlet*.

The possibilities for ambiguities, reflections, images, shadows, enigma pressing from all sides, the curious, dreadful sense of unreality, of phantasmagoria, a universe of dream-desolation, are infinitely enhanced by sophisticated use of the art of illusion. Add to it an inventive extension of the ordinary concept of madness into an extraordinary mythic madness in Hamlet and the combinations and permutations become well-nigh endless. That Hamlet is a courtier, young lover, prince, scholar, soldier, hunter, spy, challenger, challenged, prophet, man of desire, corrupt man, diseased man, scourge, self-scourge—that he is all these at once and at the same time is poet-dramatist—carries complexities beyond any full assessment; add Hamlet's definition of his Ghost/Father/Self as Apollo, Jove, Mars, Mercury—indeed every god—and we do have essential man, primal man, somehow contained in the all-embracing memory of the most sophisticated of Renaissance figures.

There remains then one matter: how Shakespeare uses madness, in its ordinary sense as he may have understood it, by extending its implications, its power in represented extremes, as dramatic means.

That Shakespeare knew a good deal about madness in the usual sense of insanity can be believed from both external fact and internal evidence from the plays. Elizabethan England was notably lax in its attitudes towards the insane. Some were locked in Bethlehelm, and perhaps other such places; far more walked the roads of England and the streets of London freely. The plays show that Shakespeare was very aware of their vivid excesses in speech and action. Beyond a fairly extensive roster of eccentrics of many kinds, there is an inarticulate Othello mouthing his passionate distraction; a 'Tom o' Bedlam' echoing the cosmic madness of Lear, after the madman's lesser echo, the Fool, has beat his anguished heart out for his possessed 'nuncle.' These of course are no more examples of literal madness than is Hamlet.

Mental distractions did not then have the terminologies now attached to them, but they were there; we have no new madnesses. There is little point in trying to categorize an Othello, a Lear, or a Hamlet in such terms. There is much point in recognizing one or another insanity to see how Shakespeare, having observed it and absorbed its phenomena and its artistic potential, used it, as all else, for the ends of dramatic myths, especially
in one about a cosmic madhouse-prison. Thus the terms schizophrenia and paranoia are most useful in attempting some assessment of poetic madness that shapes the colossally obsessed and disturbed Hamlet.

Other literary myths lend their support. Through a rather simple, mechanical device (yet with power) Robert Louis Stevenson has given us the frightening evil of Hyde destroying his twin self and thus himself. In a novel reflecting Melville's deep absorption in Shakespeare the story of Ahab, twin of an evil Moby Dick, is told by Ishmael through the overwhelming three days of final destruction, only to have the telling begin again by an Ishmael who survives in a coffin. There are more; indeed all tragic heroes are tragic heroes by virtue of deep ambivalence, enigmatic paradox within, although they are not always invented in terms of obvious parallel to madness.

Hamlet is not represented as alternating between two characters, unless we choose to stop with Horatio/Hamlet. His character is shown in perpetual sea-change, a Protean image unequalled anywhere in mythic-poetic art. Yet it seems reasonable to postulate the fact of schizophrenia as preliminary to attempts to formulate metaphoric parallels to Hamlet in the prison of his mind. We may best begin by remembering, as Edith Hamilton points out, 'the uncertainty between good and evil … in every one of the deities,' and by noting the classic pattern of what is termed schizophrenia.

In general terms the schizophrenic is caught up in a pattern like that of the primal myth-maker. It seems likely that the latter, from a state of direct response to intimations and forms of meanings in surrounding phenomena that appeared to correspond to his emotional, physical, and psychological forces, became gradually a qualifier of his self-understanding through conscious consideration of formal realities in such phenomena. The schizophrenic, on the other hand, is compelled in the dominating 'mad' half of his identity to an inflexible vision which absorbs all that he sees, hears, touches, smells, tastes into his world of private reality. Even here there appears to be a likeness. Many invented gods are counterparts, and the story, no matter in what myth it may appear, varies only in accidentals; its basic pattern remains constant. The myth-maker varies the particulars and eventually, in literary myth, controls an elaborate combination of past myths, whereas the schizophrenic has no such control; he has no choice; his compulsion forces any and all particulars into whatever idée fixe it is that shackles him. Again even this has its relevance to the true mythmaker, who is, or cannot help but be, totally faithful to the compelling, controlling unity of the vision he expresses in art.

There are other general considerations. The schizophrenic's other 'sane' self is often indistinguishable from 'normal' man, just as poets need not be extreme in conduct, except as he may have been (or is) involved in actual ritual. Too, both have exactly the same phenomena to respond to; only their essential selves may have differences. Shakespeare had his profession, the Globe, the Renaissance world, a great deal of the past in memory, and his own experience and inner states to qualify his myth-making. So too the schizophrenic may have varying internal and external conditions and influences to identify him. But in basic elements all myth-makers and all schizophrenics are, respectively, the same: each has a universal form. What makes the whole consideration here extraordinary is that Shakespeare is a poet 'possessed' in Plato's sense, inventing a figure who is not only like an unendingly multiple schizophrenic, but also a possessed poet/dramatist/actor within the fiction.

From these general elements we may now briefly note what appear to be relevant particulars in schizophrenia.

The schizophrenic, when he talks (and typically talks beyond restraint except for periods of mute depression), tells his story to its end only to begin again, and yet again. He is caught in an interminable revelation of self through any and all phenomena of the reality he feels and sees. He is most often in a state of suspicion; he is surrounded by spies who intend him harm, even to kill him, and therefore he must spy on everyone and seek to kill. As spies, others are hunting him; in de-fence, he must hunt them. The ambivalence makes defence offence; he is always, when in the paranoid state, an imminently potential killer. Given his double, opposed character, he becomes the spy/hunter turned on himself, the potential self-killer. He battles his own vision.
He is given to arrogance (or an arrogant humility) which often expresses itself in identity with Christ as sacrificial victim (or self-offered sacrifice). This arrogant identity may equally be with a god or gods or any other figure of great power, and especially of sacrifice. The paranoid quality is locked to the arrogance, which is often violent, always potentially so. He is also often obsessed by the compulsive power of sex.

King/Hamlet speaks of Hamlet's

… confusion,
Grating so harshly all his days of quiet
With turbulent and dangerous lunacy.

The Queen says,

And thus a while the fit will work on him.
Anon …

His silence will sit drooping.

This is precisely descriptive of the manic-depressive form of schizophrenia.

Too, the intelligent schizophrenic is extraordinarily skilled in the cunning guile of guileless imitation of sanity. He can be so persuasive in this as to be most dangerous. He is often extremely articulate, fluency and wit combining in an air of artful innocence. He can set forth his assumed character with as much modesty as cunning.

One is led to believe or entertain the belief that, insofar as all of the schizophrenic's enemies—the spies, the hunters, the ever-present threatening killers—are extensions of his own distorted dream, he may in some strange subconscious way be aware of this duality, aware that all is a twin-imaged projection of self-compulsion. But whether this be true in fact or not, it can be made a movingly true fiction by a myth-maker inventing some ultimate form of schizophrenia to 'catch the conscience of the king.' If so, we may expect him to invent many 'twins,' even multiple sets of identical twins. One thinks of Horatio/Hamlet, of King/Polonius; back of these the indistinguishable Rosencrantz/ Guildenstera, and back of these their lesser shadows, Cornelius/Voltemand; one thinks of Pyrrhus/Fortinbras; of Bernardo/Osric as challengers; and several more; all finally surrounding in near and receding images the centre—the anguished soul of Hamlet. There is further the twin form of Ophelia/Queen.

These identities are not individual, either in the structure of the play or in the character of Hamlet. There are mergings, overlappings, modulations; indistinguishable shiftings: two become one, three become one or two, and so on variously; all, although they seem to move outwardly, move to a concentric Hamlet. The 'schizophrenic' repetitions of the story, single, interwoven, divided but combined, narrated, intimated, mimed, acted out, presented in symbol and ritual, do not at all interrupt the literal dramatic narrative which has so long beguiled those caught in the Hamlet web.

There is no satisfactory way of attempting to say how Shakespeare managed to create such a figure. But, beginning with Hamlet's own metaphors (invented by Shakespeare), through metaphoric use of those we see literally as 'madmen,' 'schizophrenics,' caught in the wards of the prisons of their 'Elsinores,' we may hazard some sense of the power of Hamlet, and from this, perhaps, respond more fully to Shakespeare's myth.

Our introduction to this other world comes from Hamlet. He has been in a happy, beautiful world, only to find that
I have of late—but wherefore I know not—lost all my mirth … it goes so heavily with my disposition that this goodly frame, the earth, seems to me a sterile promontory; this most excellent canopy, the air, look you, this brave o'erhanging firmament, this majestical roof fretted with golden fire—why, it appeareth nothing to me but a foul and pestilent congregation of vapours.

This desolate subjective state he has indicated in significant terms just before:

HAM     What have you, my good friends,  
deserved at the hands of Fortune that she  
sends you to prison hither?  
GUIL Prison, my lord?  
HAM Denmark's a prison.  
ROS Then is the world one.  
HAM A goodly one; in which there are many  
confines, wards, and dungeons, Denmark  
being one o' th' worst.  
ROS We think not so, my lord.  
HAM Why, then 'tis none to you; for there is  
nothing either good or bad but thinking  
makes it so. To me it is a prison.

Or again, in his Ghost identity, he speaks of the 'secrets of my prison house' which are so dreadful that they may not be revealed. Or again, 'perchance to dream: … aye, there's the rub! / For in that sleep of death what dreams may come I ... Must give us pause.' But this, the prison of death, filled with mad and frightening dreams, with fearful threatening shadows moving about and towards him endlessly in a walpurgis night, is not an imagined thing for Hamlet: although he debates in his ambiguity whether he should risk going there, he is already, without choice, in this purgatory, this dreadful and bitter prison house. He has died out of it only to be reborn into it in the brief breath of 'Long live the King,' endlessly accompanied by a troop of spirits who, emanating from himself, hedge him about with revulsion and terror.

In this invented madhouse prison wanders the invented madman Man; we are irresistibly drawn to imprisonment with him in the Globe, whether we read, or see and hear, mutes and audience to the act. Whatever compassionate, fearful empathy we may ever have felt, or feel, for the paranoic-schizophrenic and his troop of accompanying spirits, whether it were or be in our own sad, doomed family, or in the family that surrounds us to the furthest reaches of our known world—always beyond it the reaches of silence—this response can be only most imperfectly approximated by literal-metaphoric equivalents. But they may help in an assessment of the art of Hamlet. As metaphors schizophrenic-paranoids imprisoned in their frightful worlds are paradigm for lost man; in the Hamlet vision universal man.

Here is confined a distracted young lover, fearful and resentful of interference by a father. This may be the father of the woman whose affection he shares, or, in his compulsive confusions, her brother; or the husband of a woman beyond the strictures of convention if not nature, a mother, wanting whom is a terrifying violation. This feeling is confined in a nutshell; it presses severely on the mind, the cumulative force of all of woman, all of man in conflict over woman who will take any man to satisfy nature's need for procreation. In these 'foul imaginings' all men are dangerous, all women are a desolating temptation to the gross, violating act, the urgencies towards which lie no less within himself.

In another cell paces a young man who has been a soldier, in reality or in imagination, in Hal / Henry's words one who will 'imitate the action of the tiger; / Stiffen the sinews, summon up the blood, / Disguise fair nature with hard-favour'd rage; / Then lend the eye a terrible aspect ... The gates of mercy shall be all shut up.
the flesh'd soldier rough and hard of heart, … shall range / With conscience wide as hell, mowing like grass / Your fresh fair virgins … / What is't to me … / If your pure maidens fall into the hand / Of hot and forcing violation? (Henry V III.i.6-9; iii. 10-21 passim). He is, in short, a Pyrrhus, a Mars, who is a terrifying violator.

Or here is a hunter, a skilled falconer, an expert in pursuing the stag and deer with hounds, exercising his cunning to overtake or drive out of hiding his prey. His hunting image may give way spontaneously to that of horsemanship: not only 'let the stricken deer go weep,' but also 'let the gall'd jade winch,' an identity that may go through sea-change to become Death, the centaur, if he is at all a scholar.

Or he may be any or all of these yet have been scholar first—a university student, contemplator of self, of man and eternity, in chaotic-ordered estimates of the bitter complexities and limitations of man against imponderable forces. These he expresses in frantic repetition to himself (within the hearing of other madmen) in a series of choruses to his forever excoriatingly futile act to solve his private dilemma. Or again he may be a politically important figure, one on whose choice—a madman without choice—'depends / The safety and health of this whole state …' His state can be his family, an Elsinore, a Denmark, a world.

These several figures, and more, drooping in their cells, or walking, watched, in their wards, are in an identical outward world: the same doors, and stairs, and lobbies; the same walls and battlements; the same institutional head, the same orderlies and guards. The same visitors: fathers, mothers, old companions. Outside can be seen the same casual figures, man and woman, of any street: a company on military drill, two lovers under a tree, two guards; farther away, two soldiers walking towards him. Dawn; a dazzlingly beautiful spring day; a breathless star-filled snow-cold night. Fireflies; gray-clad storms; roosters crowing; wisps and clouds of fog. A painting of a great castellated fort where cliffs beetle over a raging sea. On some wall, or hung around the neck, family pictures or miniatures. In the near distance the sound of cannon for military observance, accompanying the laughter of a group of visitors. A cross in a chapel. Screaming violence, bloody oaths, an attempted killing, a killing, a rape, a priest, a black confining cell from which waking is to the same doors, and stairs, and lobbies, and walls, and a troop of threatening faces all his own, and all again and again and again. And again.

But none of these things need be actually around him, except perhaps the people, and finally not even these. He brings all with him from his past. Mnemosyne is his familiar. And when he lives and dies and lives at the centre of the round-walled Elsinore of the Globe, he has another familiar, the myth-maker of whom Plato has said, 'the vulgar deem him mad,' who can trans-literate him into total myth.

This image both divides Hamlet and is most incomplete. But we may from this limited division possibly sense something of the synthesis which is one of the great inventive powers in the play. What action these separately identified schizophrenics might see is not indifferent. Each need not be postulated; whatever one sees is seen by any other in his own defined character and context: the particulars vary, the essence is constant. It may be better not to take the simplest form; certainly we cannot take the most inclusive.

He sits in a ward generally occupied. He sees and hears the director of the institution, distinctively dressed, issuing orders to two orderlies, identically dressed, to go to another ward where a young patient is overtly threatening to kill the director and seize his wife, or his chief nurse. Strangely, director, orderlies, other attendants, various vague figures, all remind him of someone he knows—his own face in a mirror. Moments later two orderlies enter his cell; they are apparently different, but his cunning mind seizes the deception: they are the same two sent to spy on, to punish sorely, to kill the threatening young man—who is himself. Suddenly it is apparent that they too are identical in appearance, twins—and identical with himself. But the director has somehow been murdered by the dangerous madman spied on and has been succeeded by his brother. There are visitors, or inmates—a young woman, an older woman; they are at once his mother and a girl he has seduced or who has seduced him. They are joined by the girl's father and brother, but the first is the same as the director's brother, and the latter again the mirror image of himself; the father no less image of the
murdered director and the succeeding brother. Now suddenly seduced girl and mother come into his view: they are identical. He attacks both as each, for in some confused way he would not be locked in this desolate nightmare had they not tempted him to the violent compulsive act that incarcerates him in his purgatorial prison. In this kaleidoscopic dream he fights a twin, is killed by the other, kills the other, kills a mother and father, then wakes to the agony of the whole tormented nightmare again.

What we have thus far sought to imagine becomes far more complicated by all the confusing yet relevant cross-complexities and particulars that are interfused through the characters of hunter, spy, soldier, scholar, courtier, prince, and all the others, each of whom sees phenomena in his own way. But in Shakespeare's poetic invention all are seen at once, all act and speak at once, in one figure; there is no rational division possible. The whole figure is, beyond ordinary conception, one figure whose 'hallucinations,' never cancelling each other, create the obsessed, mad Hamlet who bears all of the desolations that destroy man.

The invention in *Hamlet* seems to be something like this, infinitely magnified to create the play's power. But Shakespeare's art does not end here. In a sense it begins here, for the ultimate power in *Hamlet* is that of poetry and the theatre, of the total illusion which challenges what may be dreamed of as ultimate truth. The Hamlet figure is illusionary placed within illusion, inventor of illusion within illusion, chief illusory actor within the illusion, surrogate for the master of illusion who created him—the possessed poet working in the illusionary world of the Globe, circled by England and 'this side of our known world,' by Christ and Satan, by the desolated Garden, by God and his angels, by Apollo and Diana, Jove and Hera, and, in some strange silent terminus, by Gaea-Ouranos, Earth and Sky.

**Duncan Salkeld (essay date 1993)**


[In the excerpt below, Salkeld describes the political dimension of madness in *Hamlet*, as indicative of the power of subversion.]

Madness seems to belong in English Renaissance tragedy. It lends a distinctive pathos of inexorable self-destruction to plays which might otherwise be merely violent. But madness in the age of Shakespeare was not merely a playwright's Senecan device. It was put to more sophisticated uses. In the first place, its personal and moral implications were enormous. Madness signified a terrible loss since it rendered the body useless. The punishment of the soul in hell would be more comprehensible since it would reflect the unerring judgement of God. Men and women must accept their fate. Madness, however, belongs to the present world where its suffering takes place among unspeakable cruelties. It is more agonising than hell because the loss attaches itself to the living. Madness is not a consequence of sin, like judgement, but contemporaneous with it, deferring judgement even for the most determined villain. But the insane in Renaissance tragedy were not merely victims of a brutal society; they were also violent, murderous and politically dangerous. Blood may have blood, as the revenge maxim went, but madness will have blood too. Recognition of this fact seems to have made the control of mad people by the authorities both in and outside the dramas an increasingly urgent consideration… .

In *Hamlet* (1601), madness takes the form of paranoia, breeding in palace rooms in an atmosphere of whispers, suspicion, secrecy and confinement. Concealment has always a subversive potential, and it is out of the obscurity of Hamlet's resentment that the threat of revenge is pressed against Claudius. Denmark is from the start in a state of shock and confusion. The whole place seems mad. To the melancholy Prince, the world is a prison, ‘a rightly one in which there are many confines, wards and dungeons, Denmark being one o’ the worst’ (II.ii.245-6). Its inmates, says Claudius, are ‘the distracted multitude, who like not in their judgement but in their eyes' (IV.iii.4-5). According to Horatio, "The very place puts toys of desperation … into every
brain' (I.iv.75-6). Chateaubriand called the play 'that tragedy of maniacs, that Royal Bedlam, in which every character is either crazed or criminal, in which feigned madness is added to real madness, and in which the grave itself furnishes the stage with the skull of a fool.' The question of madness preoccupies the drama as one of its central themes. Hamlet hints that he has 'that within which passes show' but never unambiguously reveals what he holds within the hollow prison of his flesh. The madness remains a question, defined by Polonius as a question: 'Your noble son is mad. / Mad call I it, for to define true madness, / What is't but to be nothing else but mad?' (II.ii.92-4). Above all, it remains a political question. It is important to remember that Hamlet's madness is not a problem of what is going on inside the character's 'mind'. As Francis Barker suggests, the play anticipates the Cartesian moment when the soul or mind would be decisively separated from the body but lacks the discourse to articulate that knowledge. The Prince will not be put on the couch and made to tell all: talk of Hamlet's mind must be historically specific, and anyway, he goes to some lengths to obscure his rationality. Similarly, the cause of Hamlet's delay is not something for criticism to explain since most of the soliloquies are taken up with asking precisely that question. As Harry Levin and Maynard Mack remind us, the questions are more important than the answers. Madness explains nothing about the Prince's psychology but forms part of the wider political conflict which is the play's main concern.

The play's crisis of sovereignty is marked by a power vacuum created by the death of Old Hamlet. Denmark has two kings, one dead and one fake, neither of whom can rule effectively. One warns and forebodes; the other plots and schemes. But no one rules. Claudius tries to do so but by murdering his King and brother he has violated the very legitimacy and sanction of sovereignty itself. Killing the King has wider effects, as Macbeth also discovers, than a mere change of monarch. Murder does violence to the State, and not even the ghosts of the dead, with all their remembered virtue, can restore the golden age that has been lost. The ghost in Hamlet 'com'st in such a questionable shape' (IV.iv.43) that it throws all into doubt: the murder, the marriage, the madness and the revenge. The crisis of sovereignty of which it tells is compounded further by Hamlet's thought that the ghost may be an evil genius: 'the devil hath power / To assume a pleasing shape, yea, and perhaps I ... abuses me to damn me' (II.ii.595-6). Kings may indeed turn out to be devils. Throughout the play, Hamlet struggles to address two areas of doubt: first, regarding the veracity of the ghost and, second, the guilt of Claudius. The fear and uncertainty with which the play begins stems from the crisis of sovereignty figured in the regicide. The tense responses to the question 'Who's there?' nervously called out in the dark, betray the insecurity of Hamlet's world. The appearance of the ghost dwells on the sentries' minds more than the prospect of war: 'Is not this something more than fantasy? What think you on 't?' (I.i.57-8). Horatio shares their unease if not their superstition: 'This bodes some strange eruption to our state' (I.i.67-72).

The two kings in the first two scenes of Act One give iconic representation to a contradiction of sovereignty. From the outset, the drama is in crisis. The deep uncertainty of the guards has its roots in the death of Old Hamlet. Effectively, what Claudius put to death in the poisoning of his brother amounted to more than the King's two bodies. It gave the fatal wound to the legitimacy of the myth of absolute sovereignty: 'The cess of majesty / Dies not alone, but like a gulf doth draw / What's near it with it' (III.iii. 15-17). So the play begins in a political vacuum, a 'gulf, filled only by the vaporous memory of a golden past, and a toy monarch who as early as the second act realises that the game might well be up. The change from order to disorder is not dramatised in the play because the myth of order was in fact never a reality. The act of rupture or contradiction, the killing of the old King, is dispersed throughout the text, in ghost's testimony, in the dumb show and Claudius's prayer, to form the truth which on which the revenge narrative depends. The original moment of disorder is thus occluded, projected behind the horizon of the ghost's emergence. What matters, as the sentries remind each other (I.i.83ff), is that the old myth of sovereignty has died with the King. And yet that ancient rule retains a haunting presence, a ghostly semi-existence in the sham of monarchy which Claudius attempts to enforce but cannot sustain.

Claudius as King embodies the contradiction of sovereignty since it is that royalist ideology he has denied. The division is most keenly felt in the prayer scene where he strives, 'like a man to double business bound', with ambition and remorse. But it is felt, also, within the social body as Claudius cynically admits: 'our whole
kingdom … contracted in one brow of woe' (I.ii.3-4). Ironically, the trope of the 'body politic' is here invoked by Claudius as a means of shoring up his power. James used it for virtually the same reason. Claudius handles it superbly with Laertes: 'The head is not more native to the heart, the hand more instrumental to the mouth, than is the throne of Denmark to thy father. What wouldest thou have Laertes?' (I.ii.47-9). In the same scene, Laertes lectures his sister on the doubtfufulness of Hamlet's affection: 'for on his choice depends the sanity and health of this whole state' (I.iii.20-1). But the body metaphor serves equally to subvert the dominant power. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern let the truth out in a particularly telling Freudian slip: 'Never alone did the King sigh, but with a general groan' (III.iii.22-3). The sighing and groaning recall for Claudius the expirations of the dying King, and the emptying of power from Denmark which that death incurred. It is little wonder that Claudius's reponse is curtly dismissive: 'Arm you, I pray you, to this speedy voyage, / For we will fetters put about this fear, / Which now goes too free-footed' (II. 24-5).

Metaphors of sickness and disease in the play convey the danger of subversion. When Claudius ironically grieves that the State is 'out of joint and out of frame', or stresses the urgency of meeting Hamlet's threat in the words 'He's lov'd of the distracted multitude … Diseases desperate grown by desperate appliance are relieved', the body trope serves as the concept by which the contest for power may be obliquely acknowledged. Hamlet himself uses the trope as a means of attack and evasion when Rosencrantz asks what he has done with Polonius's body. He replies, 'The body is with the King, but the King is not with the body. The King is a thing—.' 'A thing, my Lord?' asks Guildenstern. 'Of nothing', Hamlet responds (IV.ii.26-9). The head has been severed from the nation. And sovereignty is dead; a thing of nothing. A King without a body, as James well understood and as his son, Charles, would discover to his cost, is indeed nothing. But Hamlet's words cut deeper in subverting the empty politics of the moment with the body metaphor. He explains in true malcontent fashion 'how a king may go a progress through the guts of a beggar' (IV.iii.30-1). The comment turns inside out a political hierarchy that has already lost its validity and power. The idea of a real and almost total collapse of power relations envisioned in such remarks must have been almost unthinkable for the Elizabethan and Jacobean audience. Though not completely so perhaps, for James went to considerable lengths to put the idea out of parliamentary minds.

The play refers to a variety of kinds of madness. Horatio dismisses talk of the ghost as the guard's 'fantasy' (I.ii.26) and fears that Hamlet 'waxes desperate with imagination' (I.ii.87). The Prince himself confesses to 'bad dreams', a 'sore distraction' and 'madness' (V.ii.225). His 'antic disposition' (I.iii.180) is variously interpreted by Claudius as 'Hamlet's transformation' (II.ii.5), 'Hamlet's lunacy' or 'distemper' (II.ii.49, 55), 'this confusion' and 'turbulent and dangerous lunacy' (III.i.2, 4). Claudius and the court remain in some doubt as to Hamlet's real state of mind. Polonius regards Hamlet as the stock mad lover of Elizabethan literature ('this is the very ecstasy of love', II.i.102, cf.III.i.162). Gertrude is convinced of her son's madness despite his disclaimer, 'That I essentially am not in madness, but mad in craft' (III.iv. 189-90). Ophelia becomes 'importunate, indeed distract'. Claudius, with remarkable foresight, regards her as a perfect example of the Lacanian split subject, 'Divided from herself and her fair judgement' (IV.v.85). Through the diversity of these terms, the meaning of madness is displaced in the text, scattered across the strategies of resistance and revenge. The madness is part of the complex game Hamlet plays: as prince and fool, he uses it both to resist Claudius's sovereignty, and to evade the revenge encounter at the same time. Hamlet's madness, like any other, resists interpretation. The play itself, apart from the critics, fosters controversy over the issue. Is he mad? How much does he feign? The questions remain undecidable, as Maynard Mack has concluded: 'Even the madness itself is riddling: How much is real? How much is feigned? What does it mean? Sane or mad, Hamlet's mind plays restlessly about his world, turning up one riddle upon another'. Like his father, Hamlet appears 'in questionable shape' (I.iv.43). He appears first quite mad, with his 'wild and whirling words' issuing from a 'distracted globe', and then, penetratingly sane. Even Polonius is puzzled by his 'pregnant' replies, the method in the madness. He toys with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern like the fool setting verbal traps to outwit his fellows. He changes between the types of a 'Tom o' Bedlam' and a 'John-a-dreams'. As Hamlet struggles to comprehend his situation, the occasions when he is merely joking and when deadly serious become increasingly difficult to distinguish. In the confusion, even the tragic form of the play can be lost. In her report of Hamlet's raid on her
closet (II.i.73-80), Ophelia describes the ridiculous appearance of the Prince, his 'stocking's foul'd', his legs 'ungarter'd and down-gyved', his 'knees knocking each other', and 'a look so piteous in purport as if he had been loosed out of hell to speak of horrors'. The description echoes Malvolio's 'midsummer madness', and serves only to confirm Polonius in his suspicions. Hamlet at Ophelia's door, down-gyved and madly staring, presents a figure of comedy, a Pyramus who kills himself most gallant for love, a 'contemplative idiot'. But there is real violence in the appearance, for it terrifies the 'affrighted' Ophelia (II.i.103).

The madness of the Prince, real or feigned, is produced out of contradictory forces in the play. As Hamlet struggles with the 'mighty opposites' of conflicting loyalties, he becomes a site of contradiction, entrapped within what Foucault terms a 'space of indecision'.

Pray I cannot,
Though inclination be as sharp as will,
My stronger guilt defeats my strong intent,
And, like a man to double business bound,
I stand in pause where I shall first begin,
And both neglect.

(III.iii.38-43).

Struggling to choose, he is all 'the more engaged'. Eventually the decision is made for him, since 'words without thoughts never to heaven go' (III.iii.98). Hamlet's dilemma is not so easily resolved. He is addressed by two worlds, the 'sterile promontory' and the 'undiscover'd country', two kings and two fathers. In his indecision, trapped between the 'incensed points' of being and not-being, Prince Hamlet becomes a 'dull and muddy-mettled rascal', the 'paragon of animals' and yet 'the quintessence of dust'. Gertrude describes him as a site of conflict: 'Mad as the sea and wind when both contend which is mightier' (IV.i.7-8). As Prince and 'peasant slave', Hamlet embodies a contra-diction that divests him of the power to act or decide. It is within this space between mighty opposites that the madness of Hamlet is played out: 'What should such fellows as I do crawling between earth and heaven? We are arrant knaves all, believe none of us' (III.i. 128-9). It is only in the final act, on return from England, that he appears to have made his choice: 'The interim is mine' (V.ii.73). For on it depends the sanity and health of all Denmark.

The contradiction Hamlet embodies is not simply a dramatic aporia, a kind of textual apoplexy. As Mad Prince, Hamlet enacts the incoherences of the Renaissance ideology of sovereignty. For Hamlet, the entire question of life hangs on what is 'nobler in the mind'. Horatio's warning about the ghost ('What if it tempt you toward the flood, my lord, / … And there assume some other horrible form / Which might deprive your sovereignty of reason / And draw you into madness', I.iv.73-4) shows keen foresight. When Hamlet dismisses Ophelia to a nunnery or brothel, Ophelia cries, 'O what a noble mind is here o'erthrown … that noble and most sovereign reason, like sweet bells jangled out of tune and harsh' (III.i. 150-61). Madness does not function in the play as a theoretical abstraction. It is neither passive nor silent. Madness strays at the brink, confronts the monstrous, and resounds in the ears of its witnesses.

The subversive power of madness is made clear by Ophelia's 'dangerous conjectures'. It is through madness that Ophelia eventually 'comes out' and insanity makes of her an 'importunate', assertive and dangerous figure. A gentleman warns that though 'Her speech is nothing, / yet the unshaped use of it doth move / the hearers to collection. They aim at it, / And botch the words up to fit their own thoughts' (IV.v.7-10). Ophelia's 'distraction' (the word suggests being drawn in different directions), signalled visually in winks, nods, gestures and her hair down, is produced by the dangerous vicissitudes of revenge and presents a further threat to Claudius's already failing rule. Horatio cautions Gertrude, 'Twere good she were spoken with, for she may strew dangerous conjectures in ill-breeding minds' (IV.v.14-15). Suddenly, the dutiful daughter has become a witch, a speaker of mysteries. Claudius has some experience of mad persons and shares Horatio's concern,
though for different reasons. He promptly orders her surveillance: 'Follow her close; give her good watch, I pray you' (IV.v.74). The change in Ophelia is marked. In the early scenes of the play, she promises to turn out as the kind of victim of Elsinore that Gertrude has become: a woman whose presence is little more than a convenience for men. Her sanity keeps her on the periphery of the play's action; moderately useful to Polonius and the King, but otherwise, a 'green girl'. In a scene of 136 lines, in which her relationship with Hamlet is the principal theme, Ophelia speaks a mere twenty lines (I.iii). She is passive, obedient, ordered about and kept in ignorance of the reasons why. Laertes advises her to consider Hamlet's station: 'Fear it, Ophelia, fear it my dear sister and keep you in the rear of your affections … ' (I.iii.33-4). Polonius bullies her: 'Do not believe his vows … Look to't I charge you, come your ways' (I.iii. 135). Hamlet dismisses her probably to a nunnery and possibly to a brothel. Ophelia thus has to cope with the task of resolving the contradictions that such conflicting loyalties produce. In these circumstances, madness become her asylum, her space between the 'incensed points of mighty opposites' (V.ii.61).

Even in madness, Ophelia is patronised as the 'pretty lady' and 'poor Ophelia', 'divided from herself and her fair judgement, without which we are pictures or mere beasts' (IV.v.85-6). But Ophelia's 'self and 'fair judgement' were never more than a construction of femininity, qua submissive daughter and chaste lover, imposed upon her by the men in the play, Polonius, Laertes, Hamlet and now Claudius. In contrast, madness brings Ophelia briefly but spectacularly to life as a lover and folk-tale heroine. She has started to sing. Insane, Ophelia breaks from the subjection of a vehemently patriarchal society and makes public display, in her verses, of the body she has been taught to suppress. Her speech, once brief and submissive, is now dangerously lyrical, figurai and promiscuous. No longer closeted and sewing, passively obedient to the men who owned and subjected her, she roams the palace grounds. Ophelia is followed because no one dare touch her. She will not be taken by the hand. But this vision of a femininity other than that constructed by men for women could not, in the early seventeenth century, last for long. Ophelia's madness already announces her death: 'O heavens, is't possible a young maid's wits should be as mortal as an old man's life?' (IV.v. 159-60). Dressed in all the colour of flowers, Ophelia's body reads as 'a document in madness', inscribed with an insanity soon to be erased altogether. The dominant symbol of the closing scenes is now the Fool's skull, the tragic equivalent of the ass's head in the comedies, an emblem of madness and change, and shortly after she has bid the Court goodnight, Ophelia is tempted towards the flood (to use Horatio's words), slips under 'so many fathoms … and hears it roar beneath'.

The cause of Ophelia's madness is only ambiguously answered by the play. Polonius, no doubt, would have a theory about it (cf. II.ii. 145-9), but Claudius holds the more pragmatic view. It stems, as he sees it, from 'The poison of deep grief: it springs all from her father's death' (IV.v.75-6). Thus he makes Hamlet responsible. But if Claudius is evasive about his own culpability, so equally is Hamlet:

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What I have done …
… I here proclaim was madness.
Was't Hamlet wrong'd Laertes? Never Hamlet.
If Hamlet from himself be ta'en away,
And when he's not himself does wrong
Laertes,
Then Hamlet does it not, Hamlet denies it.
Who does it then? His madness. If't be so,
Hamlet is of the faction that is wrong'd;
His madness is poor Hamlet's enemy.
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(V.ii.226-35)

The division of subjectivity that both Hamlet and Ophelia experience ('If Hamlet from himself be ta'en away' / 'Poor Ophelia, divided from herself and her fair judgement') is an effect of the political and social failure that extends throughout the play. Hamlet declares himself to be of the faction that is wronged. As he sees it, he is
more acted upon than acting. So it is hardly surprising that not even he can make sense of his actions, his 'madness'. Unable to contain all the conflicting duties of sonship, revenge, and prospective sovereignty, Hamlet registers his confusion by making madness, and no longer Claudius, his enemy. The question of individual (as opposed to corporate or social) culpability is raised and dropped in the same moment. The play at once glimpses the Cartesian moment of essential identity and loses sight of it. The responsibility for Ophelia's madness is shifted back on to the madness of political turmoil and social unrest. At the same time, every subject, action and resistance is implicated in the failure of reason and social order dramatised in the play as an inexorable movement towards death and a certainty at last. …

Notes


10 Maynard Mack in Dean, op. cit., p. 245.

11 Foucault, op. cit., p. 287.

Alison Findlay (essay date 1994)


[In the following essay, Findlay focuses on the "relationship between words, madness and the desire for order" in Hamlet, especially in terms of the discourses of gender and language.]

Some four hundred pages into *The Anatomy of Melancholy* Robert Burton comes close to admitting that his task is impossible:

> Who can sufficiently speak of these symptoms, or prescribe rules to comprehend them? … if you will describe melancholy, describe a phantastical conceit, a corrupt imagination, vain thoughts and different, which who can do? The four-and-twenty letters make no more variety of words in divers languages than melancholy conceits produce diversity of symptoms in several persons. They are irregular, obscure, various, so infinite, Proteus himself is not so diverse … ¹

This passage reveals the tensions that exist between language and mental disorder, between documents and madness. Words are inadequate to anatomize Burton's subject but remain the means of control and communication. One must 'speak of these symptoms' in order to 'prescribe rules to comprehend them', difficult though the task may be. Burton's own description of madness significantly uses the metaphor of language and problematizes the relationship between the two even further. He compares 'melancholy conceits' to 'the fourand-twenty letters', says the symptoms of mental illness are a 'variety of words' and describes the people who exhibit them as 'divers languages'. The extended metaphor suggests that identity and madness are verbally constructed. In reverse, it also implies that letters, words and languages are themselves mad. Like the symptoms of melancholy, they carry a plurality of meanings, an excess of interpretations. Although Burton begins the extract by stressing the importance of speech as a means of rational control, he ends it by implicitly
eliminating the difference between language and the insanity it seems to subjugate.

The relationship between words, madness and the desire for order is the subject of my investigation into *Hamlet*. My aim is not to provide an analysis of the causes and symptoms of Hamlet's or Ophelia's madness *per se*. By comparing their roles, my essay will examine how gender dictates access to a language with which to cope with mental breakdown. It will consider how madness produces and is produced by a fragmentation of discourse.

Before proceeding to these detailed examinations, it is important to look at the court, the social context in which Hamlet and Ophelia speak. The world of Elsinore is particularly vulnerable to madness. Renaissance physicians, preachers and astrologers commonly cited fear and grief as the principle causes of mental disorder. These emotions abound in Denmark, imperilling the sanity of society at large. Excessive mourning was regarded as particularly dangerous, so the moderate show of grief evident in I. ii. is a safeguard against madness as well as a disguise for crime. Gertrude's composure in response to her husband's death is not a type of insanity, a loss of the 'discourse of reason' (I. ii. 150), but a protection of it. For Claudius to consider his crime too deeply would also be dangerous. He ironically speaks the truth when he claims 'That we with wisest sorrow think on him / Together with remembrance of ourselves' (I. ii. 6). Hints in the text suggest that a preoccupation with the murder, combined with an increasing fear of Hamlet, threatens Claudius's sanity as the play continues (III. ii. 295-9 and IV. iii. 69-70).

Outside the immediate Hamlet family circle, the prison of Denmark is the asylum for a 'distracted multitude' of inhabitants (IV. iii. 4). At the opening of the play Francisco admits he is 'sick at heart' (I. i. 9), and the sighting of the ghost by Bernardo and Marcellus is regarded by Horatio as a symptom of mental instability (I. i. 26-8). The audience, who also see the ghost each time it appears, are included in the community of disordered consciousnesses. This is made explicit in V. i. when the Grave-digger refers to Hamlet's exile:

> HAMLET: Why was he sent into England?
> GRAVE-DIGGER: Why, because a was mad. A shall recover his wits there. Or if a do not, 'tis no great matter there.
> HAMLET: Why?
> GRAVE-DIGGER: 'Twill not be seen in him there. There the men are as mad as he.
> (V. i. 145-50)

The 'distracted globe' (I. v. 97) extends beyond Denmark to embrace the spectators. Amongst the English audience, Hamlet's lunacy will not be noticed; he speaks the same language.

The death of King Hamlet puts the language of Elsinore out of joint as well as disrupting its emotional order. The characters struggle to rationalize their experiences in a court where discourse has broken down into a 'rhapsody of words' (III. iv. 48). At the top of the power structure a fissure is created: 'The King is a thing … Of nothing' (IV. ii. 27-9). King Hamlet is a spirit without a form, a figment of madness or 'fantasy', whereas King Claudius is an empty letter of majesty. Neither has full presence in the play. As a result, the action can no longer be suited to the word nor the word to the action. With the death of King Hamlet, the network of close knit meanings and signs unravels so that all the characters become prisoners of an unstable and plural language. Claudius comments on the gap between 'my deed' and 'my most painted word' (III. i. 53). Words are no longer fixed by any palpable intention; the 'very soul' has been plucked out of the 'body of contraction' (III. iv. 46-7), and it is impossible to identify that which 'passes show' (I. ii. 85). In *Madness and Civilization* Foucault explains how these circumstances where 'Meaning is no longer read in an immediate perception' make a signifying system (like that of language) very accommodating to madness. Once the sign is detached from any authentic intention, it becomes 'burdened with supplementary meanings, and forced to express them.
And dreams, madness, the unreasonable can also slip into this excess of meaning. 

Elsinore constructs a courtly discourse characterized by verbosity and an anxiety to fix meaning by definition. In II. ii., Polonius's speeches provide an example. He introduces the subject of Hamlet's madness with the words:

My liege and madam, to expostulate
What majesty should be, what duty is,
Why day is day, night night, and time is time,
Were nothing but to waste night, day, and time.

I will be brief. Your noble son is mad.
Mad call I it, for to define true madness,
What is't but to be nothing else but mad?

(II. ii. 86-94)

Polonius's oratory does, as Dr Johnson claimed, make mockery 'of prefaces that made no introduction, and of method that embarrassed rather than explained', but it also displays an infinite 'deferral' of meaning. The opening lines are not about the nature of majesty, duty, day, night or time, but the failure of language as representation. Polonius may be tedious, but he is not stupid. He shows an awareness of his own mode of expression as a system of self-referring 'limbs and outward flourishes' (II. ii. 91). Like Burton, he recognizes a close relationship between language and madness in spite of their apparent opposition as embodiments of reason and non-reason. To define madness is to 'be nothing else but mad'. His insight into the nature of words makes him appear as foolish as Hamlet. It displays 'an absurd agitation in society, the mobility of reason'.

It is in this disturbed environment that Hamlet and Ophelia are threatened with mental breakdowns, rendering their need to define their experiences and redefine themselves particularly acute. The extent to which they are able to 'put [their] discourse into some frame' (III. ii. 300) is an essential element in the contrasting representations of madness that Shakespeare offers in these two characters.

In the preface to The Anatomy of Melancholy, Burton explains that he wrote the book not simply for the elucidation of others but as a cure for his own mental illness:

I might be of Thucydides' opinion, "To know a thing and not to express it, is all one as if he knew it not." When I first took this task in hand, et quod ait ille, impellente genio negotiwm suscepi [and, as he saith I undertook the work from some inner impulse], this I aimed at, vel ut lenirem animum scribendo, [or] to ease my mind by writing; for I had gravidum cor, foedum caput, a kind of imposthume in my head, which I was very desirous to be unladen of, and could imagine no fitter evacuation than this … I was not a little offended with this malady … I would … make an antidote out of that which was the prime cause of my disease.

Burton equates expression and knowledge, suggesting that the traumatized individual can only become self-aware through the external articulation of a malady.

Working with language allows him to step outside his condition: 'to ease my mind by writing'. He uses his complaint as the raw material for his book, and recording ideas about melancholy becomes a treatment and cure.

After what must be Hamlet's most disturbing experience to date—the ghost's revelation of the murder—the prince resorts to the same selfcure in order to control his 'distracted globe'. The discourse of his mind has been
interrupted by a voice which speaks only to him and which introduces a range of experience that could easily put him from 'th' understanding of himself (II. ii. 9), but writing and speech provide the means to couple 'all you host of heaven', earth and hell (I. v. 92-3). To avoid a diagnosis of schizophrenia (where the subject experiences voices not his own inserted into the mind from outside), Hamlet responds to the ghost's news with a determination to document his experience and the ghost's voice:

from the table of my memory  
I'll wipe away all trivial fond records,  
All saws of books, all forms, all pressures  
past  
That youth and observation copied there,  
And thy commandment all alone shall live  
Within the book and volume of my brain …  
(I. v. 98-103)

This mental record does not prove sufficient; thoughts of Gertrude and Claudius disorder the regular rhythm of Hamlet's speech and distract his mind again (I. v. 105-6). To control this outburst of emotion, Hamlet turns to external documentation—writing in his tables. Once Claudius has been 'writ down' a villain after the ghost's report, Hamlet can return to his own 'word' (I. v. 110). Further details in the play show how Hamlet uses his control over the written word to empower himself in emotionally disturbing situations. He writes to Ophelia, to Horatio and to Claudius, and rewrites his destiny by substituting his own letter to the English monarch. He adapts The Murder of Gonzago as The Mousetrap in order to 'catch the conscience of the King' (II. ii. 601), and even when he is reading a book he imposes his own meaning or 'matter' onto the words to mock Polonius (II. ii. 191-204).

The importance of rewording to restore mental equilibrium is clear after Hamlet's second encounter with the ghost in III. iv. His initial responses to it convince Gertrude of his madness since his eyes look wild, his hair stands on end and his speech of spontaneous expression seems to be a discourse with the 'incoporal air' (III. iv. 118). As on the previous occasion, once the ghost has departed, Hamlet is ready to reencode his experience in a language which will make it appear reasonable. He tells Gertrude

It is not madness  
That I have utter'd. Bring me to the test,  
And I the matter will reword, which madness  
Would gambol from.  
(III. iv. 143-6)

Hamlet's ability to transpose experience from one language to another is shown at several points. Rosencrantz and Guildenstera say he is at once 'distracted' but using a 'crafty madness' to remain impenetrable (III. i. 5, 8). He tells them himself that he is 'but mad north-northwest' and that he can distinguish his sane speech from that of lunacy, knowing the difference between a hawk and a handsaw (II. ii. 374-5). Polonius and Claudius also recognize method in Hamlet's madness which, to Claudius, indicates a degree of self-awareness on Hamlet's part (III. i. 165-7). Hamlet's double voice bears similarities to contemporary cases of mental illness like that of Richard Napier's patient who would use 'idle talk' and cry out on devils in his distraction but could talk 'wisely until the fit cometh on him'. Popular accounts of melancholy pointed out that patients were frequently able to scrutinize their own abnormal behaviour from outside, whereas true lunatics could not. Hamlet follows this pattern, describing himself as analyst and patient when he apologizes to Laertes at the end of the play:

What I have done  
That might your nature, honour, and exception  
Roughly awake, I here proclaim was madness.
Was't Hamlet wrong'd Laertes? Never Hamlet.
If Hamlet from himself be ta'en away,
And when he's not himself does wrong
Laertes,
Then Hamlet does it not, Hamlet denies it.
Who does it then? His madness. If t be so,
Hamlet is of the faction that is wrong'd;
His madness is poor Hamlet's enemy.

(V. ii. 226-35)

Hamlet refers to his madness as a 'sore distraction' with which he is currently afflicted (V. ii. 225), so his self-analysis is not a retrospective one except in the narrowest sense. He speaks both inside and outside his malady, as he had done earlier, making use of syntactic modification to explain and control his mental state.

As the play shows, Hamlet does not always talk so wisely. In comparison to the measured blank verse of the lines above, much of his speech is in a style which makes little immediate sense to the characters around him. Although Hamlet depends on 'Words, words, words' (II. ii. 192) to stay sane, the disturbing encounter with the ghost has made him inescapably aware of their plurality and artifice. This forces Hamlet to fall into a speech which will expose différence. He tells Rosencrantz and Guildenstern that he cannot make 'a wholesome answer'; his wit is diseased (III. ii. 313).

His 'distracted' speeches suggest that it is language as much as female sexuality, neglected love, or grief that has made him mad. His conversation with Ophelia about beauty, honesty and discourse (III. i. 103-15) links his emotional concerns and his awareness that speech is common to a multitude of meanings rather than honest to one. Hamlet demonstrates this blatantly in his use of puns. His 'antic disposition' (I. v. 180) uses a style which Irigaray would term 'feminine' since it is a direct contradiction of the authoritative power of language used to maintain patriarchy. His 'mad' speeches exploit a lack of unity in the subject and 'undo the unique meaning, the proper meaning of words'.

Hamlet's distrust of language is dangerous since it threatens to invalidate the very means which he uses to avoid breakdown. It is like the patient realizing that his cure is a poison to drive him further into madness. Discussing Plato's use of the ambiguous word pharmakon to describe writing, Derrida points out that pharmakon means both 'poison' and 'remedy'. Hamlet is in the position of seeing both sides of this paradox at once. He recognizes the need for language to construct sanity but cannot escape his awareness of its essential folly. What allows him to reconcile the two and avoid complete mental collapse is his use of theatre. It is not surprising that he welcomes the players so warmly. By virtue of their status as performers they are able to provide a register of speech which allows Hamlet to tell the truth of his father's murder while demonstrating the artificial nature of all utterances. The players are able to 'Suit the action to the word, the word to the action' (III. ii. 17-18) within a signifying system, a play whose social construction is obvious. J. L. Austin's theory of speech acts would discredit their performative utterances as 'parasitical' by pointing out that their fictional nature would abrogate the speaker's responsibility and deny them the required 'serious' intention. But behind this bait of falsehood lurks a series of truths. Firstly, the 'parasitic' declarations present truths in that their false nature merely reflects the lies which dominate the court world and thus shows, as Hamlet wished, 'the very age and body of the time his form and pressure' (III. ii. 23-4). In addition, their self-conscious artifice exposes all utterances as repetitions of an already-written script, however truthful they may be. By demonstrating the dramatic truth of each particular fictional moment, the actors anticipate Derrida's response to Austin, showing that all speech acts are performative (dependent on the context in which they are produced and received) and that all are performances, even though they may be authentic.

Theatre therefore provides Hamlet with the ideal metaphor to expose the rhetoric of power which operates in Elsinore. He questions Polonius about his role as an actor (III. ii. 97-105) and welcomes Rosencrantz and
Guildenstern, using imagery of performance (II. ii. 366-71). By contrasting the hypocritical welcome he gives them with that he will give the players, he suggests the equally rhetorical nature of all such 'fashion and ceremony' (II. ii. 368), whether it be genuine or not. His quaint revenge on Rosencrantz and Guildenstern is to create new roles for them in England in a play of his own devising (V. ii. 30-2).  

The combination of truth and illusion in theatre is what Foucault identifies as a 'tamed' madness: 'theatre develops its truth, which is illusion. Which is, in the strict sense, madness.' Since this madness carries its illusion to the point of truth, it provides the ideal expression of Hamlet's dilemma. After the success of his own performances, he asks 'Would not this … get me a fellowship in a cry of players?' (III. ii. 269-72). The scene highlights important ideas about Hamlet's role as a madman. He adopts his 'antic disposition' quite openly, telling Horatio, 'I must be idle' (III. ii. 90). Whether Hamlet is clinically mad or mad in craft is finally irrelevant since there is no difference between illusion and truth once the play of language is exposed as a 'crafty madness' (III. i. 8). For this reason, *Hamlet* contradicts Foucault's view of madness in Shakespeare's work as 'beyond appeal', where 'Nothing ever restores it either to truth or to reason'. In the case of Hamlet, it occupies a median rather than an extreme place, displaying both the breakdown of reason and the control of insanity in language. Hamlet's 'tamed' madness is not considered as a 'tragic reality' but only in 'the irony of its illusions'. It already exhibits elements of self-reflection which provide a prototype for classical madness:

Tamed, madness preserves all the appearances of its reign. It now takes part in the measures of reason and in the labour of truth. It plays on the surface of things and in the glitter of daylight, over all the workings of appearances, over the ambiguity of reality and illusion, over all that indeterminate web, ever rewoven and broken, which both unites and separates truth and appearance.

The balancing act which Hamlet is able to maintain throughout the play is dependent on his ability to use a verbal and theatrical metalanguage with which to construct and contain the experience of insanity. This is a language which Ophelia does not have. Her experience seems much closer to Foucault's definition of madness in Shakespeare's work. He cites her as one example of insanity which 'leads only to laceration and thence to death'. It is not that Ophelia's grief for her lost love or her father's death is more intense than Hamlet's. She suffers differently because of her gender. To examine this further, I want to use Irigaray's thesis that in madness 'there are specific linguistic disturbances according to sexual differences'. Irigaray argues that, in cases of schizophrenia, gender appears to dictate a patient's access to a language with which to articulate trauma, that a woman in a state of madness does not have the same means for elaborating a delirium as a man. Since female patients cannot transpose their suffering into language, they suffer schizophrenia as corporeal pain: 'instead of language being the medium of expression of the delirium the latter remains in the body itself'. This theory is echoed very closely in Burton's discussion of 'Women's Melancholy' (indeed, the book itself shows a marked contrast in the documentation of male and female experience, since 'Women's Melancholy' occupies only five out of a total of over a thousand pages of analysis). Burton remarks:

Many of them cannot tell how to express themselves in words, or how it holds them, what ails them; you cannot understand them, or well tell what to make of their sayings; so far gone sometimes, so stupefied and distracted, they think themselves bewitched, they are in despair, aptæ ad fletum, desperationem [prone to weeping, despondency]; dolores mammis et hypochondriis, Mercatus therefore adds, now their breasts, now their hypochondries, belly and sides, then their heart and head aches; now heat, then wind, now this, now that offends, they are weary of all; and yet will not, cannot again tell how, where, or what offends them, though they be in great pain …

The play shows clearly that Ophelia does not have the speech and writing which Hamlet uses to cope with mental crisis. While Hamlet is 'as good as a chorus' (III. ii. 240), Ophelia has only a tenth of the number of lines he speaks. She does not appear able to discuss her distraction in a rational way and turns her suffering
inwards on her body. The gentleman who reports her madness to Gertrude says that Ophelia 'hems, and beats her heart' (IV. v. 5) and implies that she communicates through physical gestures (IV. v. 11). He tells Gertrude, 'Her speech is nothing' (IV. v. 7). Such details appear to endorse the links between silence and hysteria proposed by Cixous, who writes:

Silence: silence is the mark of hysteria. The great hysterics have lost speech … their tongues are cut off and what talks instead isn't heard because it's the body that talks and man doesn't hear the body.\textsuperscript{17}

Using this idea to read the play produces a depressing picture of Ophelia as 'Deprived of thought, sexuality, language'; and concludes that her role becomes 'the Story of O—the zero, the empty circle or mystery of feminine difference', as Showalter remarks.\textsuperscript{18} Attempts such as Ranjini Philip's to read Ophelia's suicide in positive terms as 'an existential act of partial selfawareness' in order to tell her story as 'something' seem pessimistic.\textsuperscript{19} In the hope of finding a more positive image, I want to turn to the work of one of Shakespeare's female contemporaries. Far from remaining silent, this woman produced a written account to explain her mental breakdown to physicians, fellow sufferers and, more importantly, to herself. A brief examination of Dionys Fitzherbert's manuscript, written in 1608, provides the opportunity to see Ophelia's ravings in a new light.\textsuperscript{2}

Dionys's text, \textit{An Anatomie for the Poore in Spirrit} contradicts those who would link female hysteria and silence. Her aim is to differentiate her breakdown from other types of madness by analyzing it as a spiritual test, a trial by God. In a preface, she openly challenges those who would label her case as madness and outlines in detail the differences between melancholy, as defined by contemporary medical theory, and her own symptoms. She points out that 'the like passages doth more then distinguish their case from all others in the judgement of any well seeing eyes'.

Dionys frequently makes reference to reading, writing and speech, suggesting their importance as means of rationalizing her experience. She points out that at the height of her fits and torments she was 'for the most part speechles if not altogether' and suggests the physical dangers caused by this loss:

\begin{quote}
they thought yt almost impossible many tymes for me to live an hower, but that my hart must needs splitt and rent in peeces with the unutterable groanes and sighes that were continually powerd forth, being neither able by teares nor speech to expresse the unspeakeable dolour and torment of my sowle.
\end{quote}

When she first recovers speech, her voice is split between declarations of atheism and expressions of religious faith, a confusion which she calls 'the discourse of the mynd'.\textsuperscript{21} She is later able to converse more lucidly and uses reading and writing to recover and prove her sanity. She stresses the importance of allowing a patient access to literature and the means to write and tells how upsetting it was to have her books removed so that she could no longer continue her study of Scripture. When she was recuperating in Oxford, her greatest affliction was occasioned by visiting the libraries:

\begin{quote}
the multitude of books which I saw in which I had taken such singuler delight, now strooke me to the hart to thinke I could have noe comfort of them.
\end{quote}

Her recovery is helped by the gift of a book, \textit{The Comforter}, and by the writing of a religious mediation. Her restoration to complete mental health is seen in the account itself. \textit{An Anatomie for the Poore in Spirrit} is the means by which Dionys is able to explain what has happened to her and it stands as testimony to her sanity. In describing her case, she often confuses the identities of patient and analyst, the afflicted Dionys of the past and the recovered and diagnostic Dionys who writes, but for the most part the text reads lucidly. The preface in which she challenges those who would label her as mad is logically organized and forcefully argued. She
points out how strong opposition can sometimes allow patients to 'find out the truth even in themselves, as my example … doth evidently shew'.

In *Hamlet* we cannot read Ophelia's *Anatomie* of her condition, nor does the text indicate that she ever has the opportunity to write one. Without the language with which to discuss her case, she remains largely incoherent. This is not due to a failure in language itself or to an essential silence on the part of women hysterics. Whatever the limitations of words in expressing female experience, Dionys's case proves that they remain a valuable tool for the transposition of internal distress. More important than an inadequacy of language is Ophelia's very limited access to any verbal communication with which to unpack her heart. Polonius's advice to Laertes, 'Give every man thy ear, but few thy voice' (I. iii. 68), is taken to an extreme with Ophelia who is forbidden to 'give words or talk with the Lord Hamlet' (I. iii. 134) or with anyone else except under supervision. She becomes a private document where her father and brother imprint their words and control the articulation of ideas by means of lock and key. In the sense that Ophelia's mind is forced to accommodate voices inserted from outside, she is a schizophrenic from the beginning of the play. These imposed voices conflict with a repository of emotional and critical perceptions which she is rarely able to express. Only occasionally does Shakespeare give hints about the contents of Ophelia's thought book, as in her response to Laertes's advice which implicitly mocks the double standard (I. iii. 46-51). When she tells Hamlet, 'I think nothing, my lord' (III. ii. 116), she refers not to a lack of thought but to the censure placed on the expression of her own emotions and opinions. This lady cannot 'say her mind freely' (II. ii. 323-4) at moments of crisis. In her interview with Hamlet in III. i., she speaks what she ought to say rather than what she feels. Having suffered a torrent of abuse, she describes herself as the viewer/analyst of his mental collapse rather than giving full voice to her own feelings (III. i. 152-63). Since Polonius silences her completely with the words, 'You need not tell us what Lord Hamlet said, / We heard it all' (III. i. 181-2), she has no opportunity to communicate her distress.

The death of Polonius confronts Ophelia with an unprecedented access to language which is both liberating and frightening. It unlocks her tongue from the repetition of patriarchal meanings and allows her to speak as author of herself, a situation for which she and the court are totally unprepared. Even though Polonius's censure is removed, other characters try to silence or ignore her. Gertrude says, 'I will not speak with her' (IV. v. 1), and she and Claudius constantly interrupt Ophelia. Laertes attempts to impose meaning on her language, reducing her from an active speaker to an object of interpretation, a document in madness.

She is first of all a text of filial love, whose wits are bound to her beloved father in the grave (IV. v. 159-63). She then becomes a petition for revenge (IV. v. 167), and finally, an aesthetically pleasing translation (IV. v. 185-6). Unlike Dionys Fitzherbert, Ophelia is only able to express the confused 'discourse of the mynd' which is then documented by others with explanatory footnotes. The gentleman who reports her madness to Gertrude points out that Ophelia's 'unshaped' speech

```plaintext
  doth move
  The hearers to collection. They aim at it,
  And botch the words up fit to their own
  thoughts,
  Which, as her winks and nods and gestures
  yield them,
  Indeed would make one think there might be
  thought,
  Though nothing sure, yet much unhappily.
  (IV. v. 8-13)
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Even in this role as a 'document in madness', Ophelia finds a way of speaking. The gentleman may say 'Her speech is nothing' (IV. v. 7), but David Leverenz is wrong to conclude that 'even in her madness she has no
voice of her own'. Ophelia's songs and quotations give her a very definite register, one which demonstrates the 'citationality' of all speech. Her lines are confused but they have 'matter' (IV. v. 172). As Bridget Gellert Lyons points out, 'While her language is more oblique, pictorial, and symbolic, she expresses the discords that Hamlet registers more consciously and with greater control in his language and behaviour.' Although Ophelia cannot analyze her trauma, her language of madness is appropriate to the expression of such ideas.

By distributing flowers in IV. v., Ophelia draws attention to the breakdown of unique meaning in Elsinore, revealing the ambiguous signification of Flora and flowers as symbols of both innocence and sexual prostitution. She parodies Elsinore's attempts to structure its environment verbally in her own definitions of the flowers and their meanings. These are undercut when she points out the ambiguity of rue: 'You must wear your rue with a difference' (IV. v. 180-1). The plant may signify repentance, but the word 'grace' means nothing if applied to Claudius. Ophelia's songs, which give clues to the causes of her distraction, are in the same mode as Hamlet's adaptation, The Mousetrap, and his use of ballad (III. ii. 265-78); but, unlike Hamlet, she will not act as a chorus. She tells her listeners, 'pray you mark' (IV. v. 28 and 35), obliging them to make a variety of subjective interpretations. Claudius's attempt to impose a single masculine meaning by saying the song is a 'Conceit upon her father' (IV. v. 45) is rejected out of hand by Ophelia. She tells him, 'Pray let's have no words of this, but when they ask you what it means, say you this' (IV. v. 46-7), and then sings another ballad which, rather than explaining the song, illustrates the 'deferral' of meaning. One ballad can only be interpreted in terms of its difference from another, and all are blatant repetitions of the 'already written'. It is therefore impossible to 'make an end' (IV. v. 57) in terms of meaning. Ophelia's determination to finish her song reveals a preoccupation with the performative nature of speech. She has just as much cause as Hamlet to mistrust vows, and the last verse about oaths (IV. v. 58-66) deconstructs the seriousness of all such declarations by demonstrating the equally rhetorical nature of false and true vows.

While Ophelia's thoughts lack the self-control and clear articulation found in many of Hamlet's speeches, the scenes do show that she is struggling to convey important ideas. Because of the rigid prohibition on her speech earlier in the play, it is not surprising that she 'speaks things in doubt / That carry but half sense' (IV. v. 6-7). In this she is surely typical of her period. Dionys Fitzherbert's text gives inspiring evidence of a woman's success in challenging the conventional view of the silent hysteric; the case of Margaret Muschamp, some forty years later, gives a more accurate impression of the difficulties encountered by such women. Margaret fell into fits and heard 'voices' between the years 1645-7. Believing she was bewitched, she tried to communicate the names of her tormenters by writing, after she had come out of the extremity of her fit. The account shows the degree of corporeal pain suffered by the female schizophrenic:

"After a while she would make her hand goe on her brest, as if she would write, with her eyes fixt on her object; they layd paper on her brest, and put a pen with inke in her hand, and she not moving her eyes, writ, Jo. Hu. Do. Swo. have beene the death of one deare friend, consume another, and torment mee; whilst she was writing these words, she was blowne up ready to burst, shrinking with her head, as if she feared blowes; then would she be drawne, as in convulsion fits, till she got that writing from them that had it, and either burne it in the fire, or chew it in her mouth, till it could not be discerned …"

Like Ophelia's lines, Margaret's accusations against John Hutton and Dorothy Swinnow are a spontaneous outpouring, an incompletely articulated discourse of madness. The impulse to write is combined with an equally strong negative response to the document she produces. Unlike Burton or Hamlet whose transcriptions ease the mind, Margaret's experience of writing provokes fear which is expressed in bodily terms as painful convulsions and swellings. Far from helping her condition, the literal expression of her ideas causes guilt and stress. The only way of relieving her physical torment is to destroy the illegitimate product of her labours: to burn it or to eat it, thus reincorporating her words. Even if the paper was taken from her and hidden, Margaret Muschamp would continue to suffer, until she had sought out the document and destroyed it. When 'none could discerne one word she had wrote, then immediately she would have ease'.

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The discussion of writing here has important implications outside the immediate context of the extract, since the account was written by Margaret's mother, Mary Moore. Does Margaret's experience provide Mary with a meta-narrative to discuss her own problems in producing the text in a period where female chastity was equated with silence? To transgress and articulate,—let alone write, was to be regarded as deviant, abnormal. To write a document on madness was to become a document in madness to a certain extent. The experience of Ophelia, trying to find a voice in the play, can therefore be read as a model for the difficulties facing Renaissance women writers; not only those like Dionys Fitzherbert and Mary Moore who were documenting madness, but also those who were endeavou ring to express their ideas in poetry, prose and plays. Like Ophelia, they may 'speak things in doubt' but they do not remain silent.

Finally, it is sobering to note that the experiences of these women find a further reflection in the work of female scholars trying to write themselves into the bibliographical history of the play. *Hamlet* has never been edited by a woman. 27 The text is notoriously challenging since the contradictions between the 'Good Quarto', the 'Bad Quarto' and the Folio make *Hamlet* itself a 'document in madness'. At I. iii. 21, the creation of 'sanity' has been, to date, the privilege of Theobald and subsequent male editors, from the starting points of 'safty' in the 'Good Quarto', the third Quarto's 'safety', and the Folio's 'sanctity'. The opportunity to rationalize the different voices of this schizophrenic text has been limited to men, the Hamlets rather than the Ophelias of the academic world, thus reproducing the gender imbalance in the play.

**Notes**


12 In *How To Do Things With Words*, Austin asserts a difference between utterances of a constative nature (answerable to a requirement of truth in their relation to the world) and those of a performative nature
(dependent on the context in which they are produced and received). He further distinguishes between 'serious' and 'non-serious' performative utterances: for the utterance to be 'serious', its speaker must take responsibility for what s/he says to guarantee the meaning of the performative in its context. In 'Signature, Event, Context' in *Margins of Philosophy*, tr. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), Derrida expands Austin's idea that actually all constative utterances are context-dependent and therefore performative; he further demonstrates that all speech acts are social constructions with an indirect rather than a direct relationship to the actions or objects they describe. This ultimately dissolves the boundaries between 'serious' and 'non-serious' utterances, revealing all speech acts to be produced in a more or less 'staged' setting.


15 Irigaray, 'Women's Exile' in Cameron, ed., *Feminist*, p. 94.


20 I am grateful to Kate Hodgkin for drawing my attention to Dionys Fitzherbert's writings. *An Anatomie for the Poore in Spirrit* exists in two versions; an original manuscript in Dionys's own hand (e Museo 169) and a fair copy in another hand with additional prefaces and letters attached (Bodley 154). Both are in the Bodleian library. Quotations are from the fair copy. My discussion of the texts is indebted to Kate Hodgkin's unpublished paper, 'Religion and madness in the writing of Dionys Fitzherbert', given at the conference, *Voicing Women: Gender / Sexuality / Writing 1500-1700*, at the University of Liverpool, 15 April 1992.

21 This phrase is taken from a letter by Dionys to M.H.


23 Bridget Gellert Lyons, 'The Iconography of Ophelia', *English Literary History*, 44 (1977), 73.

24 Lyons, 'Iconography', 63-4.


27 In the New Penguin Shakespeare (1980), Anne Barton wrote the introduction, but the text was edited by T.J.B. Spencer.
Hamlet (Vol. 35): Revenge

Eleanor Prosser (essay date 1967)


[In the following excerpt, Prosser asserts that Shakespeare's Ghost is not Hamlet's father but an incarnation of the Devil, and details the manner in which this demon exhorts Hamlet to revenge.]

Act I, Scene v

Now, at last, the Ghost speaks. And now we face the first serious possibility that it may indeed be the departed soul of Hamlet's father, returned from Purgatory, where he is "doomed for a certain term" to "fast" in "sulphurous and tormenting flames" until his "foul crimes … are burnt and purged away." Very well, let us shift our perspective, as many in Shakespeare's audience may have done, and test it on its chosen grounds—test it, that is, by Catholic doctrine.

What is the mission of the Ghost? Even before it announces its identity, we are warned: it comes to command revenge. Its first long speech is skillfully adapted to its mission. It appeals to Hamlet's love and grief, relentlessly aggravating the son's anguish by describing the pains of Purgatory. Note that it does not state one specific fact, though literature abounded with useful details. It announces that it is forbidden to tell such secrets to mortal men, and then proceeds to create an even more horrifying impression than any description would. Of course Purgatory ghosts were under no such proscription. One of their purposes in returning was to make man understand the specific pains they were suffering, and thus their mission required them to give as much graphic detail as possible. Why does this Ghost rely on the ghastly inference, the harrowing hint? It is skillfully arousing Hamlet's imagination, working entirely on his emotions. The speech builds to a compelling climax in "If thou didst ever thy dear father love—" What loving son could possibly remain calm? As Lady Macbeth knows, the most irresistible of human arguments is the question "Don't you love me?" With this preparation, it is no wonder that Hamlet leaps at the first word of murder:

Haste me to know't, that I, with wings as swift
As meditation or the thoughts of love,
May sweep to my revenge.

And the Ghost comments, "I find thee apt." That laconic observation is the first of several grim ironies in the Ghost's exhortation. Can Shakespeare have overlooked the clash of Hamlet's gentle metaphor with his violent meaning? His mind is "out of joint," as he strains with passionate eagerness for confirmation of what he has already half suspected. He is, indeed, "apt," and at this moment, while Hamlet is taut, every sense alert, the Ghost plants an idea that later gives rise to the tragic dilemma:

And duller shouldst thou be than the fat weed
That roots itself in ease on Lethe wharf
Wouldst thou not stir in this.

Its hearer is now ready, and now the Ghost reveals the identity of the murdering "serpent." Hamlet leaps: "O my prophetic soul! / My uncle!" It is clear that, like Macbeth, he had but awaited confirmation of an idea dictated by his own desires.
If we read the Ghost's long speech without preconceptions, we should be struck by its almost exclusive reliance on sensual imagery. Like Iago, it paints a series of obscene pictures and then insistently highlights the very images that Hamlet had tried to blot out in his early soliloquy: "that incestuous, that adulterate beast … shameful lust … lewdness … sate itself in a celestial bed … prey on garbage." Hamlet had known that for his own sanity he must not visualize that bed, but the Ghost rivets his eyes upon it. The culminating exhortation is not to purge the "royal throne of Denmark." It forces Hamlet again to peer into the horror that sickens him:

Let not the royal bed of Denmark be
A couch for luxury and damned incest.

Can this be a divine agent on a mission of health and consolation?

Moreover, if a pious son should immediately recognize that swift revenge was a "sacred duty," why does the Ghost find it necessary to present an extended, revolting description of the poisoning? Again its appeal is entirely to the senses. This Ghost is not appealing to Hamlet's love of virtue; it is not arousing his determination to serve the justice of God. It is doing everything possible to arouse nausea and loathing.

This Ghost cannot be a penitent soul from Purgatory. It says it is, but are we intended to believe it? It does, to be sure, speak of its agony at dying without the sacraments, but the reference serves as one more detail to intensify Hamlet's pain. Moreover, a subtle hint has been planted that is to bear terrible fruit in the Prayer Scene. The Ghost's attitude toward its suffering is also telling. Does it humbly confess its sins, acknowledging the justice of its punishment? On the contrary, it "groans" and "complains" of the agony resulting from its being unfairly deprived of final sacraments. For centuries editors have tried to give "O, horrible! O, horrible! most horrible!" to Hamlet on the grounds that the reaction ill befits a spirit of grace. So it does. A Purgatorial penitent would be a loving figure of consolation, but the Ghost that Shakespeare created dwells on the horror of its pains. The exclamation is a logical climax to the extended assault on Hamlet's emotions.

At that cry of horror, when Hamlet's agony is at a peak, the Ghost gives him the tragic burden: "If thou hast nature in thee. … Revenge. … " Nothing in the scene suggests that a divine minister is appealing to Hamlet's "nature" as a creature made in God's image whose role is to fulfill His commandments. Nor does the usual explanation suffice—that the Ghost is appealing to Hamlet's "nature" as an obedient and loving son. Throughout the speech it has been appealing to Hamlet's "nature" as an instinctive creature of passions and appetites—"fallen nature," the theologian would say. Thus its challenge to Hamlet to prove his "nature" by committing murder is the same type of challenge heard in Lady Macbeth's "Are you a man?" That this is the issue as Hamlet himself is later to understand it will become clear in "To be or not to be." The Ghost, then, fails the test that every member of Shakespeare's audience undoubtedly would have recognized as the crucial one, a failure that scholars have been trying to rationalize for two centuries: its command violates Christian teaching.

Does the Ghost, in fact, pass any of the religious tests? Well, it appears as a man, not a hop-toad, and no one mentions that it smells of sulphur. On every other test, it fails. Is it humble? How is it conceivable, it asks, that Gertrude could "decline / Upon a wretch whose natural gifts were poor / To those of mine."

(Characteristicly, it draws our attention to the physical.) Is it in a charitable state? It is thoroughly vindictive, seething in its own hatred and aggravating Hamlet's loathing. Is its voice sweet, soft, musical, and soothing, or "terrible and full of reproach"? The actor who intones these lines with melodious grace is deaf to the meanings of words. Does it carefully refrain from charging others with sin? Its mission is to condemn Claudius. Does it beg Hamlet's prayers? It says "remember me."

Some critics have tried to explain these unsettling facts as further proof that the Ghost is from Purgatory on the grounds that his anger, vindictiveness, and sensuality merely indicate that he has not yet been sufficiently purged. This argument will not do. The purpose of Purgatory is not to reform a sinner but to erase the debt of
punishment incurred by past sins that were repented before death. As Thomas More emphasizes, in Purgatory no soul can be angry, for all are in a state of grace.

But, it will be objected, the Ghost urges Christian forbearance for Gertrude. Admitted. But that is what we are warned the Devil will do: in order to disguise himself as an angel of light, he will, like Richard III, "clothe [his] naked villany" "with a piece of scripture" (I.iii.334-38). Catholics and Protestants both agreed that the mere repetition of Christian doctrine proved nothing. Both warned that we must be alert to the speaker's ultimate purpose. Let us note the context:

If thou hast nature in thee, bear it not;  
Let not the royal bed of Denmark be  
A couch for luxury and damned incest.  
But, howsoever thou pursuest this act,  
Taint not thy mind, nor let thy soul contrive  
Against thy mother aught: leave her to heaven. …

The lines are brutally ironic. "Taint not thy mind"? For over fifty lines, the Ghost has done everything possible to taint Hamlet's mind with lacerating grief, sexual nausea, hatred, and fury. It has just focused its appeal on the lewd picture that Hamlet knows can most corrupt him—and at this, it says, "Taint not thy mind"! One is reminded of Iago's consummate trickery: working Othello up to a screaming pitch and then remonstrating, "Tush, forget it. It probably means nothing."

And then: "leave her to heaven." The irony is surely the clue. Why Gertrude but not Claudius? The implication may not be immediately obvious when we see the play; we have been trapped along with Hamlet by our emotions. But if Shakespeare did not intend the irony, why did he so closely echo the familiar language of Christian exhortation—"leave them to heaven"?

Even though we have been caught up in the emotions of the scene, Hamlet's reaction when the Ghost vanishes should jolt us:

O all you host of heaven! O earth! what else?  
And shall I couple hell?

He is not merely adding a third power to his invocation of Heaven and earth. The sexual image, reflecting the success of the Ghost's insidious method, is plain: shall Hamlet join himself to Hell? Even in his distraction, he again raises the dreadful possibility. But the moment of perspective is fleeting as the rush of emotion leads him to embrace the image of his father:

Remember thee!  
Yea, from the table of my memory  
I'll wipe away all trivial fond records,  
All saws of books, all forms, all pressures past,  
That youth and observation copied there;  
And thy commandment all alone shall live  
Within the book and volume of my brain.

"Taint not thy mind"? He will wipe away all precepts, all codes, all that he has learned from books and experience. He does not say that he will erase all petty ideas in order to concentrate on his duty to his father. "Thy commandment all alone shall live / Within the book and volume of my brain." And that commandment
is to exact revenge. So committed, he fixes his mind on his victim, furiously focusing on the image of the "smiling, damned villain." When Horatio and Marcellus enter, he is hysterical with excitement. The Devil—for such I conceive the Ghost to be—has done his job well.

It may not be amiss to touch briefly on two countertheories that have gained growing support during the last few years. Several critics have recognized that Shakespeare could not have intended a spirit of health, released from Purgatory by divine will, to corrupt his son by commanding blood revenge. Thus one theory has evolved that the Ghost commands Hamlet to bring Claudius to public justice, not to murder him. A related theory reads "Taint not thy mind" to mean that Hamlet, though he is to kill Claudius, is to do so in the spirit befitting a minister of God. Most of the critics holding these views believe that Hamlet fulfills the Ghost's demand, but several see Hamlet's tragedy as arising from the fact that he either misunderstands or disobeys the Ghost. I can find no warrant in the play for believing that the Ghost is on a divine mission. Not once does the Ghost suggest that its command to revenge is the will of God. Not once does it suggest that its command—"Revenge his foul and most unnatural murder"—means anything other than what Hamlet takes it to mean: brutal, unqualified murder in direct retaliation. Any doubt is eliminated when Hamlet is told to pursue revenge in any way he chooses so long as he leaves Gertrude to Heaven. By implication, Claudius is not to be punished by Heaven. The Ghost treats Hamlet as if he were a private agent who is to act out of purely personal motives. "Remember me," says the Ghost, not "Cleanse Denmark in the name of God." Of course Hamlet may, in later scenes, qualify the command in his own mind. But in the first act, the Ghost is presented as malign.

The curious cellarage scene enforces this impression. We can probably never know exactly how Shakespeare's audience responded to the scene, much less exactly what Shakespeare intended. The repeated shifting of ground in order to swear suggests a specific convention, but a study of stage tradition helps little. The only direct echo occurs in a late comedy, which provides no guide to its meaning. As Nevill Coghill has noted, however, three of Hamlet's lines, together with his actions and those of the Ghost, provide several clues. The significant sequence is as follows:

(The Ghost cries from under the stage.)
Ah, ha, boy! say'st thou so? art thou there, truepenny?
(Hamlet shifts ground; the Ghost shifts and cries again.)
Hic et ubique? then we'll shift our ground.
(Hamlet shifts; the Ghost shifts and cries again.)
Well said, old mole! canst work i' the earth so fast?
A worthy pioner! Once more remove, good friends.
(Hamlet shifts.)

The clearest clue lies in the third line. We have noted that demons were believed to frequent mines, and Hamlet echoes this belief when he hails the "old mole" as a "worthy pioner" that works in the earth. That Hamlet is mockingly addressing an assumed demon seems likely when we find Toby Belch referring to the Devil as a "foul collier" (Twelfth Night, III. iv. 130), and Jack Juggler, a Vice, boasting that he can "conjure" both "the mole and God." This clue illuminates the other two lines. When the voice first sounds below the stage, Hamlet is startled. Two readings of his question are possible. "Art thou there, truepenny?" would imply "So it's you who are down there." "Art thou there?" would imply "So that's where you are." Viewed in context, the line thus suggests, "So you are the Devil!" The Ghost is, of course, speaking from beneath the stage, the familiar abode in
Elizabethan drama of demons, furies, and damned souls. Only a "goblin damn'd" speaks from the abyss of Hell. In *The Malcontent*, Malevole greets Mendoza with "Illo, ho ho ho, arte thou there old true penny?" (III. iii). It is significant that the line is a deliberate echo: Malevole is addressing a devilish villain. Although the OED defines "truepenny" as a trusty person, the word also seems to have been used as a term of scorn. Hamlet's mocking tone, his almost taunting familiarity, could not be directed toward a spirit of health from Purgatory. Moreover, "hic et ubique" cannot refer to an "honest ghost," for only God and the Devil can be both here and everywhere at the same time. "Then," Hamlet says, "we'll shift our ground." For obvious reasons, he must try to get away from the voice.

Whether or not this interpretation is accurate in all details, of one thing we can be sure: throughout the cellarage scene, the Ghost is acting like a devil. Scholars have been driven to fantastic lengths to explain this unavoidable fact. We read that Shakespeare is tricking his audience by stopping for a playful parody; the printer is tricking the reader by including a scene from the old "Ur-Hamlet"; the Ghost is tricking Hamlet; Hamlet is tricking the Ghost; Hamlet and the Ghost together are tricking the two amazed observers. The most popular explanation is the last: that Hamlet and the Ghost both pretend the voice is a devil to mislead Horatio and Marcellus. How could the audience be expected to know this? It is just as misled. And what motive could both Hamlet and a good Purgatorial spirit have for making Horatio and Marcellus think their Prince is in league with the Devil? "To terrify them into silence" is an inadequate answer. There is one logical explanation. Shakespeare made the Ghost act like a devil because he wanted his audience to notice that it acts like a devil.

It is true that Hamlet refers to St. Patrick, the "keeper of Purgatory," and that he tells Horatio "It is an honest ghost"; but can these two facts cancel all our other impressions? The oath by St. Patrick may suggest Hamlet's belief in the Ghost as a spirit from Purgatory, but it may just as well suggest that the Ghost has come to rid Denmark of a "serpent," even as St. Patrick had banished snakes from Ireland. And even though Hamlet does for the moment accept the Ghost as "honest," when he calms down he will be less sure.

Many readers, I would expect, have long been objecting, "But how is such an interpretation possible when it conflicts with our instinctive impression of the Ghost?" I believe that this interpretation is the only one that corresponds to our instinctive impressions—or would be, if we were free to react naturally, without the misleading preconceptions fostered by critical and theatrical tradition. We have already dealt with the faulty assumptions of scholarship, but let us now consider the Ghost as it usually appears on the stage. Of course, it may not appear at all. We may see nothing but a green light that fades in and out on cue. If it does appear, typically it is, in Robert Speaight's delightful phrase, "got up like the arch-Druid of Stonehenge." Because of atmospheric lighting, costume, and makeup, we rarely detect any recognizable human features. Rarely do we see a vigorous, warlike figure of martial stalk and frowning aspect, much less a terrifying "thing" which reacts suddenly and suspiciously to Horatio's invocation of Heaven. When "offended," it usually turns sedately and moves with funereal dignity to the nearest exit. Rarely do we see a noticeable reaction to the crow of the cock, much less the threatening start of a guilty thing upon a fearful summons. In fact, Marcellus's speech on the significance of the Ghost's sudden exit is usually cut.

The 1964 Gielgud-Burton production in New York was typical. The Ghost did not appear. It was a mere shadow on the backdrop, a disembodied voice filtered through an echo chamber. All the lines were exquisitely sung in the quavering tones of a dying saint. All of them, that is, except those that were too flagrantly sickening or obscene. These—the description of the poisoning and the picture of lust preying on garbage—were cut. In modern productions, are we ever really terrified or shocked by what the Ghost says and the way he says it? The actor is usually cast for his resonant voice and he knows it. Traditionally he chants the lines in mellifluous tones of melancholy tenderness—all the lines, including those of agony, pride, disgust, hatred, and urgency. Of course the actor is but following critical tradition, which emphasizes the Ghost's deep "glowing" love for Hamlet and his heartfelt compassion for Gertrude. But what is there in the play to justify this interpretation? One of the most striking facts about this supposed spirit of Hamlet's father is that he utters
not one word of love for his son. The Ghost's appeal is directed to Hamlet's love for his father. Moreover, the command to leave Gertrude to Heaven is not framed in words of compassion, as it could have been. She is to be left to the thorns that will prick and sting her. The picture of Gertrude that we see through the Ghost's eyes is that of a hypocrite who has been led by lust to prey on garbage. Rarely, however, does a modern audience even hear the crucial lines, for the descriptions of the poisoning and the bed of filth are usually cut.

In my judgment, a production following Shakespeare's every clue would create the same response in us today as I have suggested it did in the original audience. If we heard the terrible human passions in the Ghost's voice and saw them in its face, if we were startled by its sudden recoil at Horatio's invocation of Heaven, if we were made aware of the significance of the cock—if, in short, we could once see the Ghost that Shakespeare created, would we not be instinctively aware that we are in the presence of evil?

Notes

32 Battenhouse suggests that the Ghost's description of its abode is not intended to suggest Purgatory. Citing Dante, he argues that Purgatory was envisioned as a place of angels and music and beauty, and thus that the Ghost's description of fire and horror is to be recognized as a picture of pagan hell ("The Ghost in Hamlet," pp. 185-89). I sympathize with Professor Battenhouse's awareness that the Ghost cannot possibly be a Christian spirit of grace, but the fact seems unavoidable that the Ghost uses details that would suggest Purgatory to the Elizabethan, even as they do to the modern. Sir Thomas More's description of Purgatory in the Supplication of Souls (p. 177) includes no songs of angels. It is a place of "sights unpleasant and loathsome," a place of tormenting flames surpassing in heat any fires known on earth. The Ghost's reference to "fasting" in fires until his "foul crimes" are "purged away," his reference to the final sacraments, and the familiar details of fire and pain make it certain that both Catholics and Protestants would have recognized that he was at least claiming to be a Purgatory soul.

33 More, The Supplication of Souls, pp. 171, 178-80. It is for this reason, More explains, that he speaks of the "head" and "hands" of disembodied souls. In order to make mortals realize the pains of suffering souls, he must explain in humanly understandable terms. One also wonders about the odd statement that the Ghost can walk only at night. True Purgatory spirits can appear at any time.

34 "As so often in Shakespeare, the metaphors undo the logic and tell the truth over its head." Goddard, The Meaning of Shakespeare, p. 349.

35 John F. Danby's discussion of the two meanings of "nature" is illuminating. On the one hand, "to follow nature" might mean to conform to one's role in the divine pattern ordained by God; on the other hand, it might mean to follow one's instincts. Danby clarifies the distinction by referring to the former as Hooker's sense of the word and to the latter as Hobbes's. (Shakespeare's Doctrine of Nature, London, 1949, pp. 15-53.) The Ghost's appeal has usually been interpreted in Hooker's sense: "If you have any filial feelings, obey your duty as a son." Since, however, "to follow nature" in this sense means to act by the dictates of disciplined reason, "to have nature" suggests that the word is used in Hobbes's sense. The Ghost seems to be appealing to something innate, something instinctive.

36 The stage tradition that has Hamlet yank out his tables and frantically write down Claudius's villainy lest he forget it has always seemed unwise to me. The action strongly suggests that he has gone mad. The most effective interpretation I have seen was by a Hamlet who jabbed the picture into his brain with a rigid finger. This seems to me Shakespeare's intention. Hamlet has said he will clear the "table of [his] memory" and put the Ghost's command in "the book and volume of [his] brain." The imagery indicates that the "tables" are not in his pocket but in his mind.

These views have been fully developed by Bowers, Elliott, and Ribner.

The echo occurs in Fletcher's *The Woman's Prize*, V. iii. In *Antonio's Revenge*, III. ii, the voices of the dead Andrugio and Feliche as well as that of the living Pandulpho echo Antonio's words "from above and beneath." The scene is a clear parallel but it does not include the device of shifting ground. Joseph Quincy Adams suggests that a clue may be found in the Chester *Processus Prophetarum*. Balaam, prevented by God from cursing the children of Israel, three times shifts his ground at the suggestion of Balak in an attempt to defy God's commandment. "Some Notes on Hamlet," *Modern Language Notes*, XXVIII (1913), 40.


See *II Return from Parnassus* (London, 1606), fol. C3v (II.iv).


**Harold Skulsky (essay date 1970)**


*In this essay, Skulsky examines the myriad motivations operating in Hamlet's character, including feelings of honor and nobility, thoughts of cowardice and suicide, and the desire for revenge.*

It has always struck me as rather curious that the ghost should begin its final instructions to the Prince of Denmark with the words: "But howsoever thou pursues this act" (I.v.84). This evasive "howsomever" serves to point up the fact that the ghost has been disobliging enough to leave the task of defining revenge squarely up to Hamlet. The play, however, taken as a whole, is rather more obliging; for it illustrates two popular alternatives—the law of the talon and the code of honor, we may call them—either of which Hamlet might well choose. It will repay us to consider the light in which these are exhibited to Hamlet, and to us, before looking at the terms in which Hamlet eventually defines his mission, thereby resolving the ambiguity to his own satisfaction.

I

Strictly considered, the principle of the talon is not very aptly described as a law at all, for its essential motive is not obligation but will, and the satisfaction it seeks is limited neither by reciprocity nor, for that matter, by any other standard. What the talon lusts after is nothing less than the total destruction of the hated object and of all that can be identified with it. This "all," of course, will normally have its posthumous element. In a culture without a clear concept of damnation or of an immortal soul substantial enough to be worth the damning, the self may still be thought of as surviving, and vulnerable, in its lineal posterity. Aristotle's argument for a degree of misfortune after death is a celebrated case in point; and the archetypal avenger in this sense will be a figure like the Virgilian Pyrrhus of the Player's Speech, for whom all Troy—"fathers, mothers, daughters, sons" (II.ii.462)—is a single hated extension of his own father's murderer. The indiscriminate bloody-mindedness of Pyrrhus' kind of revenge is faithfully reproduced in another Renaissance imitation, the brutal Rodomonte's atrocities at the siege of Paris:
But Rodomont whose men consum'd with fire,
Do fill their masters mind with double rage,
Yet to avenge their deaths doth so desire,
As nought but blood his thirst of blood can
swage: …
He kills alike the sinner and the good,
The reverend father and the harmless child,
He spils alike the young and aged blood,
With widowed, wives, and virgins undefil'd.

Even in a pagan, Rodomonte's homage to grief was barely explicable to Ariosto, much less excusable. For Shakespeare's audience, one strongly suspects, a Christian Prince of Denmark could embrace the law of the talon only by forfeiting all claim to sympathy. It is instructively ironic, in this connection, that the passage in which Hamlet castigates his failure to speak out should be so closely parallel in cadence to the passage in which the Player describes the only failure to act of which a votary of the talon is capable:

Yet I,
A dull and muddy-mettled rascal, peak
Like John-a-dreams, unpregnant of my cause,
And can say nothing.

(II. ii. 569-572)

So as a painted tyrant Pyrrhus stood,
And like a neutral to his will and matter,
Did nothing.

(II. 484-486)

But for the example of Pyrrhus, it would have been far easier to agree with Hamlet's estimate of John-a-dreams. In the Greek warrior even hesitation is no sign of con-science, only of surprise at the shuddering of Troy, which

with a hideous crash
Takes prisoner Pyrrhus' ear.

after Pyrrhus' pause,
A roused vengeance sets him new awork.

(II. 480-481, 491-492)

Better to "peak" like a John-a-dreams who retains some moral awareness than be "roused" to the insensibility of a Pyrrhus.

But the deeper irony of the passage exemplifies, as often in the play, the difficulty of penetrating the mind at the back of an utterance: where Hamlet, for reasons of dramaturgical symmetry cogently argued by Harry Levin, may well be moved to tears because he sees in Priam "a dear father murder'd" (I. 587) and in Pyrrhus, consequently, the uncle who did the deed, the spectator with even a smattering of Virgil could probably be relied on to recognize Pyrrhus as the son of Achilles, "of a dear father murder'd," quite specifically bent on the "vengeance" (I. 492) for which Hamlet cries out (I. 585) at the turning point of his meditation on the Player's Speech. And Hamlet himself reinforces the latter identification. For it is to this vengeance without bounds, vengeance by total destruction, that the Prince at a crucial point commits himself. The only difference is that the totality has been reinterpreted in a new and terrible Christian sense:
When he is drunk asleep, or in his rage,
Or in the incestuous pleasure of his bed,
At game, a-swearing, or about some act
That has no relish of salvation in't
Then trip him that his heels may kick at heaven,
And that his soul may be as damned and black
As hell where to it goes; my mother stays,
This physic but prolongs thy sickly days.

(III.iii.89-96)

Hamlet is devoted, at this point at least, to the death of his uncle's soul; and the devotion is not ennobling. His idea of mercy as a physic to prolong disease is a grotesque parody of the medicinal function traditionally ascribed to equitable punishment, a function performed by Hamlet himself in rebuking his mother. And it need hardly be added that Pyrrhus' rage bears no resemblance to any rule of conduct that would make it even tolerable to the audience. For if vengeance beyond the grave has nothing in common with classic penal justice, it is equally irreconcilable with the straightforward evening of scores prescribed by the Old Testament: "The reuenger of the blood himselfe shall slay the murtherer: when hee meeteth him, he shall slay him" (Num. XXXV. 19). No lying in wait, here, for the murderer's soul. Indeed, from the Christian point of view, even Laertes' promise "to cut his throat i'th' church" (IV.vii.125), however sacrilegious, is less of a sin against the Holy Ghost than Hamlet's object in not cutting Claudius' throat at his prie-dieu. And there could be little doubt in the pious mind where such desires originate. As the good Sir Thomas Browne observes: "Our bad wishes and uncharitable desires proceed no further than this Life; it is the Devil, and the uncharitable votes of Hell, that desire our misery in the world to come." And the affinity between Hamlet's aims and Pyrrhus' is not only disagreeable but a little out of character. For the Prince, in his directions to Polonius on the treatment of the players, has revealed that he is no stranger to the precept of charity, and his rejoinder to Laertes—

Laert. The devil take thy soul.
Haml. Thou pray'st not well.

(V.i.253)

—shows him quite capable of deploiring a malign purpose like his own. More than this, on reflection he comes near to seeing the similarity: "For by the image of my cause I see / The portraiture of his" (V.ii.77-78).

In view of the "portraiture" Hamlet himself claims to have recognized, there is something rather ominous about the result of Laertes' single effort at penetrating another mind. For Laertes is forced by Ophelia's madness to botch her words up to fit his own thoughts (IV.v.10), as Hamlet is, to a degree, by the ghost's ambiguities; and his conclusion is the same: "Hadst thou thy wits, and didst persuade revenge, / It could not move thus" (II. 168-169). A little later Ophelia presents her brother with a symbolic appeal equivalent to the ghost's "adieu, adieu, adieu, remember me"; Laertes is given "rosemary, that's for remembrance—pray you, love, remember" (II. 174-175). But what is to be understood by remembrance, in both cases, is an open question, and Ophelia's speech, at least, leads one of the two aspirant revengers to an unwarranted conclusion; for in the excitement of "botching up" what he wants to hear, Laertes contrives to ignore the only words his sister utters that have any clear bearing on the issue he ought to be facing: "God ha' mercy on his soul—/ And of all Christian souls I pray God" (II. 199-200). An odd way to "persuade revenge," or even to suggest it. Especially the insatiable revenge of which Pyrrhus is a type, the revenge that, in Claudius' ironic endorsement, "should have no bounds" (IV.vii.127).
But one need not, perhaps, go quite so far as Pyrrhus. There is always the possibility of being prompted to
revenge, not by anarchic hatred, but by fidelity to a code of honor coolly indifferent to the emotional excesses
of the aggrieved party. Such indifference would be distinctly more rational than the talon—if it did not extend
to the nature of the grievance itself. Laertes, for example, finds no embarrassment at all in claiming to be
undecided whether Hamlet's plea of innocence, though valid in nature, may still be unacceptable to honor:

I am satisfied in nature,
Whose motive in this case should stir me
most
To my revenge, but in my terms of honour
I stand aloof, and will no reconcilement,
Till by some elder masters of known honour
I have a voice and precedent of peace,
To keep my name ungored.

(V.ii.242-248)

Such an anomaly, oddly enough, is in perfect accord with the definition of honor laid down by such courtly
"masters" as Laertes might be expected to consult. By this definition honor does not inhere in the intrinsic
merit either of action or of agent; instead it is a quasilegal fiction regulated by analogy with the law of
property and, to a degree, of commercial credit. "There is no difference," Possevino tells us in his eclectic
Dialogue on Honor, "between someone who presses for his honor and someone who presses for his goods, or
for anything else he owns."

This fiction is reflected in the debt of duello to the terminology of Roman law; thus the challenger in a cause
of honor is the actor, the plaintiff in a suit for the restitution of alienated property, and the person challenged
is the reus, the defendant in such a suit. Since the commodity under litigation is fictitious and possession is
nine points of the law, the author of the graver insult both dispossesses his rival and imposes on him the
burden of proving his right of ownership. Normally, reciprocity will be sufficient "proof," but the sole
exception is revealing: when a man has been given the lie, he has effectively been debarred from answering in
kind; he has lost his credit, and his assertions will not pass current. "The dishonored are powerless to
dishonor." In this case the actor has no recourse but to shift the balance of injury in his own favor by outdoing
his enemy: "Verbal insult is removed, and one's opponent burdened, by giving the lie; the lie is removed by
the slap; the slap by the blow; and the blow by death." But even with injuries that lend themselves more
readily to a clarification of the truth—"che hanno pruova sufficiente"—outdoing will obviously be the more
effective remedy; so much so that in Possevino's account the inadequacy of turnabout is virtually taken for
granted. The victim of a blow will remain in the unenviable position of a plaintiff or would-be creditor "until
he has taken away the injury received and inflicted another more serious." Thus the logic of the gentleman's
code leads to the same kind of infinite regress as the lust of the talon. In both cases the successive actions at
"law," the oscillations of the burden of "proof," continue until the winner secures his honor by inflicting on
the loser an injury that cannot be overgone. Our grievance, in Laertes' words, "shall be paid with weight, / till
our scale turn the beam" (IV.v.156-157). Striking a balance will not serve, or not so well. Laertes, it would
seem, is amply justified in drawing a sharp distinction in "terms" between the law of honor and that of nature.8

If honor has its jurisprudence, it has its economics as well, and for the same reason: what is being contested is
an alienable commodity. This view, it should be understood, cannot be written off as mere cynicism, like
Falstaff's "I would to God thou and I knew where a commodity of good names were to be bought."9 On the
contrary, it is, as we have seen, the basis of the code, unmistakably if tacitly acknowledged in the imagery of
Hal's pledge to his father:

Percy is but my factor, good my lord,
To engross up glorious deeds on my behalf,
And I will call him to so strict account
That he shall render every glory up,
Yea even the slightest worship of his time—
Or I will tear the reckoning from his heart.10

Hotspur's accumulated honor is the "commodity of good names" that Hal will proceed to "engross," and when the time comes the loser will fully agree with his rival that "budding honors" are the kind of things one can "crop": "I better brook the loss of brittle life / than those proud titles thou hast won of me." The same sort of Renaissance assumption underlies the messenger's announcement to the discomfited Sacripante in Orlando Furioso (I.70): "fu Bradamante quella che t'ha tolto / quanto onor mai tu guadagnasti al mondo." In the words of Sonnet 25:

The painful warrior, famoused for fight,
After a thousand victories once foil'd,
Is from the book of honor rased quite,
And all the rest forgot for which he toil'd.

Thus honor, in the chivalric sense, is far from a contemptible prize; but it is equally far from recommending itself as a criterion of moral choice.11 And Laertes' endorsement, clearly, does little to recommend it. On the other hand, Laertes is merely pretending to confine his vindictiveness within the limits of the gentleman's code. Young Fortinbras lives by the code, and his career is consequently a fairer gauge of the standing in the play of honor as a standard for conduct.

In Shakespeare's Denmark, honor is for better or worse a young man's game—and one suspects for worse, if what the characters have to say about youth is any indication. "Youth to itself rebels, though none else near," says Laertes (I.iii.44). In youth, Hamlet agrees, "compulsive ardour gives the charge" (HI.iv.86). Polonius warns us, with some reason as it turns out, of Laertes' "savageness in unreclaimed blood" (II.i.34). And our first news of Fortinbras—"of unimproved mettle hot and full" (I.96)—is scarcely more reassuring. Like Pyrrhus, Laertes, and Hamlet, Fortinbras too has a father to avenge. His "enterprise," we are clearly informed (1.99), has no legal or moral basis; it is purely an affair of honor. And when he is thwarted in it, he simply chooses another path to his goal: "to employ those soliders, / So levied, as before, against the Polack" (II.ii.74-75). It is this expedition that inspires Hamlet's remark on the discrepancy between the intrinsic unimportance of an "argument"—a patch of ground or even an eggshell will do—and the importance one can confer on it by engaging one's honor in its defense. "Rightly to be great," he contends,

Is not to stir without great argument,
But greatly to find quarrel in a straw
When honour's at the stake.

(IV.iv.53-56)

That is, to stir without great argument is admittedly not to be rightly great, but on occasion to find quarrel in a straw is to be so; because whenever honor's at the stake a straw becomes a great argument. Far from condemning the greatness thus conferred as frankly arbitrary and factitious, Hamlet holds up the "delicate and tender prince" (1.48) as a model of decisiveness, not least because his "divine ambition" (1.49) has made him impervious to scruple; his spirit "makes mouths at the invisible event" (1.50)—including "the imminent death of twenty thousand men" (1.60).

In this lack of scruple, and in the relativity of the value to which he has dedicated himself, Fortinbras anticipates the disastrous position taken by Troilus, another of Shakespeare's "delicate and tender princes," in the debate of the Trojan council (Troilus and Cressida II.ii). Troilus, too, speaks for "manhood and honor" (1.47) against "reason and respect" (1.49); he, too, thinks of value as a fiat of the "particular will" (1.53). What
is especially instructive about the later play, however, is that it troubles to specify the crucial objection to the young man's code, namely that will as such cannot make "a free determination / Twixt right and wrong" (11. 170-171) because decisions are free only as they are "true" to objective grounds of preference, grounds that cannot be willed into and out of existence; "pleasure and revenge," Hector warns, "have ears more deaf than adders to the voice / Of any true decision" (11. 171-173). Hector's orthodox humanism, of course, is as potent a norm of Shakespeare's Denmark as of his Troy. Even Hamlet, who is positive that honor can of itself exalt an argument and impart a rightful greatness to the arguer, pointedly declines to build his whole case on it. A source of greatness it may be; but it is also, paradoxically, "a fantasy and trick of fame" (IV.iv.61). Unlike Fortinbras, Hamlet has "excitements of my reason" as well as of "my blood" (1. 58).

III

But the whole point of the speech in which these phrases occur is that reason is susceptible to diseases, notably "bestial oblivion" and "craven scruple," of which scruple is at present much the more dangerous to Hamlet; for in his view any further exercise of reason on his part will inevitably consist in the morbidity and cowardice of "thinking too precisely on th'eveent." So far, at least, Hamlet might well say (with Troilus) that "reason and respect / Make livers pale and lustihood deject." Indeed, in an earlier speech he does say some-thing very like this, and without any ambiguous deference to the "excitements of reason." Moreover, the context of this earlier remark-puts honor, as an antidote to cowardice and "craven scruple," in a very odd light.

The premise of Hamlet's best-known soliloquy is that the very process of living entails what is degrading to a "noble mind" (III.i.57), a servitude of whips and scorns, of grunting, sweating, and bearing fardels, from which such a mind will naturally choose the only possible deliverance—to die. The distinction between choosing death and suffering it, or choosing to risk it, would seem to be clear enough, but in the course of his meditation Hamlet finds an opportunity to be quite specific:

For who would bear the whips and scorns of time …
When he himself might his quietus make
With a bare bodkin?

(11. 70, 75-76)

There is, however, a difficulty that ought to be faced; for in his initial formulation Hamlet puts these alternatives somewhat more darkly: "to suffer / The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune / Or to take arms against a sea of troubles / And by opposing end them." The alternative to generic suffering, one might argue, is generic acting; so that the taking of arms in the third line can hardly suggest a specific action, let alone one so far from constructive as suicide. The weakness of this argument is that Hamlet does not in fact speak of suffering in general, but suffering fortune; and in the Elizabethan view the only alternative to suffering fortune is ending life. Indeed, active men suffer fortune with an even more conspicuous inevitability than passive, for though fortune's purview is the whole sublunary sphere, her name denotes par excellence the mutable condition of all human undertakings; to resist her is to suffer her obstreperously. "Ending one's troubles," if it is to mean a valid alternative to "suffering fortune," must be equivalent to "ending one's life." To be sure, it does not necessarily follow that "opposing one's troubles," likewise, is equivalent to "opposing one's life"; one may happen to die by unsuccessfully opposing one's troubles in the hope of surviving. But, by the same token, one may happen to realize this hope and survive. Hamlet, however, speaks of ending one's troubles, not of happening to end them; he is, after all, assessing the comparative nobility of effectual choices, not of contingent events that are beyond choice and hence cannot ennoble; this would be especially true of the series "opposing and ending," which, besides being a candidate for the title of superior nobility, can hardly exemplify the "suffering of fortune" to which it is the presumed alternative. "Ending one's troubles," in short, is not the inadvertent result but the purpose of "opposing" them. "Troubles," therefore, must be literal and not a metonymy for "things that trouble"; what is being opposed is, not the occasions of "heartache" and the
weariness of life, but the weary life itself. As has till very lately been taken for granted, the alternative to suffering fortune is dying by choice, the sole human act (according to its traditional advocates) whose consequences to the agent are beyond the control of fortune.

The recommended course, clearly, is suicide, and the terms of Hamlet's introductory "question"—whether suicide or its contrary is "nobler in the mind"—are the familiar terms of the venerable debate between pagans and Christians over the honestas or magnitudo animi of that act. Hamlet is simply taking the pagan view that suicide is, to use Augustine's report of the opposition, honestas turpia praecavens, the turpia being summed up in the Prince's metaphors from the abasements of slavery. It is the same view that Horatio, whose Stoicism Hamlet so much admires, will try in vain to live up to at the end of the play: "I am more an antique Roman than a Dane." At that point the Prince will assume that the reward of suicide is "felicity" (V.ii.346), but in the present soliloquy he is not certain, and his uncertainty enables him to argue, not only that suicide is "nobler in the mind" than the baseness of continuing to live, but that those who are ignoble in this sense are acting out of simple cowardice. It is this argument for the honorableness of suicide, especially in the dramatic context Shakespeare provides for it, that adds yet another obstacle to his audience's imaginative acceptance, not only of honor, but of revenge as well.

Hamlet argues that, all other things being equal, suicide would be the choice not merely of the "noble mind," but of any mind that appreciated the full misery of the human condition. But all things are not equal. Suicide is possible only to those who are not cowards, the others being put off by "the dread of something after death" (III.i.78). Of this "something" Hamlet has just lately received some privileged information; "after death," of course, comes punishment for ill deeds done in our "days of nature" (I.v.12)—in Claudius' case, Hamlet hopes, eternal punishment. And punishment is a thing one would not dread but for a faculty that Hamlet here calls "conscience" and elsewhere dismisses as "scruple": the practical reason or moral sense one of whose functions is consciousness of ill doing. Suicide, indeed, is only one, though a notable one, of many cases in which conscience plays a contemptible role. It simply illustrates the principle Hamlet has in mind:

Thus conscience does make cowards of us all,
And thus the native hue of resolution
Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought,
And enterprises of great pitch and moment
With this regard their currents turn awry,
And lose the name of action.

(III.i.83-88)

Suicide is, to be sure, an enterprise of great pitch and moment from the pagan viewpoint Hamlet is adopting, and he may well see it for the moment as very near the top of his agenda. But he must of course absent himself from felicity awhile. The "enterprise" that has highest priority is revenge; it is on behalf of his vow to the ghost that Hamlet fears the conscience that "makes cowards of us all"—the "craven scruple" of which his encounter with Fortinbras' army will once again seem to accuse him. But by inviting the audience to see an analogy between suicide and revenge, in the joint opposition of these two enterprises to cowardice and conscience, Hamlet is ironically subverting his case. For he has put his mission in what the play consistently shows to be very bad company indeed.

The fitful inquiry into the circumstances of Ophelia's death that occupies much of the fifth act of the play would be strangely otiose if it did not serve to drive home one point of crucial relevance: that even if a prospective suicide had no other trespasses to plague him with "the dread of something after death," the act of suicide itself would be trespass enough. Laertes' remark that his sister has been "driven into desperate terms" (IV.vii.26) anticipates the central issue, for the mortal sin of which suicide is an irrevocable expression is the sin of despair. "There is nothing worse, then when one envieth himself", that is why the Everlasting, as Hamlet himself admits, has "fixed / His canon 'gainst self-slaughter" (L.ii.131-132). And Horatio had been
speaking more as a Dane than an antique Roman when he warned Hamlet that the ghost might tempt him to suicide, and that the cliff itself might overcome him with "toys of desperation" (I.iv.75). It is precisely this theme of damnation through despair that the question of Ophelia's death refuses to let out of our sight, and the theme strikes us with all the greater clarity for the unresolved ambiguity of Ophelia's guilt or innocence. To this ambiguity the gravedigger's malaprop interrogatory, breaking the silence at the beginning of the fifth act, is a fitting prelude: "Is she to be buried in Christian burial when she wilfully seeks her own salvation?" (V.i.1-2). The second clown offers one possible answer: "If this had not been a gentlewoman, she should have been buried out a Christian burial" (11. 23-25). Gertrude has already suggested another: Ophelia made no attempt to save herself because she was "incapable of her own distress" (IV.vii. 177). The priest is uncertain, but inclines to the grimmer view:

Her death was doubtful,  
And but that great command o'ersways the order,  
She should in ground unsanctified have lodged  
Till the last trumpet.

(V.i.221-224)

Laertes, perhaps too stridently, decides for salvation:

I tell thee, churlish priest,  
A minist'ring angel shall my sister be,  
When thou liest howling.

(11. 234-236)

And Ophelia's "maimed rites" (1. 213) are equally ambiguous: to Hamlet they betoken

The corse they follow did with desp'rate hand  
Fcrdo its own life.

(11. 213-215)

And indeed we learn from the priest that they are not the same as are accorded to "peace-parted souls" (1. 232). Yet she has been buried in hallowed ground, and, as the second clown informs us, "the crowner hath sat on her, and finds it Christian burial" (11. 4-5). All this is scarcely designed to invite us to decide for ourselves; the evidence is far too inconclusive. But it does serve to prevent the audience from consigning to limbo even for a moment the doctrinal inhibitions they will have to suspend in order to make the most of a purely sensational play of revenge. And the elaborate comparison Hamlet has already made between suicide and revenge makes it doubly difficult to avoid following Hamlet's destiny with the same order of anxiety as we guess at Ophelia's. If Hamlet does not hesitate, his audience has the better reason to hesitate for him.

IV

For, despite his reticence on the point, the ghost has solemnly intimated that Hamlet's mission threatens in some sense or other to taint his mind (I.v.85); and now if ever Hamlet's danger is upon him: when he ventures to equate conscience with cowardice he virtually puts his audience on notice that his encomium of suicide and kindred enterprises is a convention not of plot but of characterization—a plague sign of taint in its ultimate phase. The espousal of libertinism, as dramatic shorthand for villainy, can be illustrated in a grosser form from a much earlier stage in Shakespeare's career. Here, from Richard III, is Clarence's murderer-to-be on conscience: "I'll not meddle with it. It is a dangerous thing. It makes a man a coward" (I.iv.137-138). His infamous employer carries less conviction in maintaining the same opinion: "O coward conscience, how dost
thou afflict me" (V.iii.179). But he maintains it all the same: "Conscience is but a word that cowards use, / Devis'd at first to keep the strong in awe" (11. 309-310). As part of a "mirror" for magistrates, the import of this detail is that the tenacity of Crookback's creed is itself a part of his doom. But the status of conscience in the present play is, if anything, far more sacrosanct. For Hamlet has arrayed against it suicide and revenge, that is, breaches of the revealed will of God; and as a partner with Scripture in that revelation, conscience is virtually an operation of grace. Laertes' consecration to revenge, which is perhaps noisier than Hamlet's if not more complete, makes this point very clear:

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.  
King. Who shall stay you?  
Laer. My will, not all the world's.  
  (IV.v.131-138)

In exalting will above conscience Laertes merely echoes without euphemism Hamlet's preference of "the native hue of resolution" to "the pale cast of thought."

But, as it turns out, conscience of some sort or other cannot be dispensed with, for an "honor" that erects will into law is no more amenable to persuasion than the lawless will of the talon. If we exorcise conscience we shall sooner or later be forced to assume something else of the kind. This is the irony of Claudius' appeal to Laertes in a later scene: "Now must your conscience my acquittance seal" (IV.vii.1). It is also the irony of the new, robust "thoughts" that Hamlet has substituted for "godlike reason," and for the thought whose pale cast seemed to him so sickly in his earlier soliloquy: "O, from this time forth, / My thoughts be bloody, or be nothing worth" (IV.iv.65-66). If Hamlet is urged on by "excitements of my reason and my blood" (1. 58), it is at the same time oddly difficult to tell the two sources of excitement apart. On the other hand, if reason and conscience can decay, honor and the gentleman's code can be redeemed, as Hamlet redeems them in the pauses of his vengefulness. The model of the "gentleman" to which he appeals in asking pardon of Laertes (V.ii.225) is not the model Claudius praises in Laertes (IV.v. 148) in preparing to seduce him to an act of treachery. And the "honor" Hamlet commends to Polonius is so far from the ordinary code of gentlemen as to be indistinguishable from Christian charity: "Use them after your own honour and dignity: the less they deserve, the more merit is in your bounty" (II.ii.535-536).

V

By the Prince's own standards, it would seem, revenge is an indulgence of the fallen will, and the honor that claims to control it, for all its legalism, is will all over again. Hamlet embraces revenge in its extreme, but with honor, as we have observed, he is not wholly satisfied; it is "a fantasy and trick of fame." An alternative sanction, however, is not easy to find; against revenge as against self-slaughter the Everlasting has fixed his canon. And the ambiguity of the ghost's origin, even more than that of its words, compounds the difficulty: if revenge is a counsel of the devil, as the faith testifies, and the ghost is a spirit of health, as the Prince eventually concludes, the anomaly of Hamlet's position achieves cosmic proportions. In this respect his invocation is prophetic indeed: "O all you host of heaven! O earth! What else? / And shall I couple hell?" (I.v.92-93). Later he will not find it necessary to ask whether he is "prompted to my revenge by heaven and hell" (II.ii.588); and this last is the "coupling" on which Hamlet's final interpretation of his role seems to depend.
To be prompted by heaven and hell undoubtedly verges on a contradiction in terms. But in fact it is not unorthodox to allow that heaven may on occasion issue the same command as hell; and in accepting responsibility for the death of Polonius Hamlet remembers what such a supernatural entente usually means:

For this same lord,
I do repent; but heaven hath pleased it so,
To punish me with this, and this with me,
That I must be their scourge and minister.

(III.iv.172-175)

A scourge of God, according to a familiar tradition of Christian historiography, is a man divinely ordained to make an example of his fellow sinners by means proper enough to God, to Whom vengeance belongs, but ordinarily fatal to the soul of the agent:

Villains! These terrors and these tyrannies
(If tyrannies war's justice ye repute)
I execute, enjoin'd me from above
To scourge the pride of such as heaven
abhors.
Nor am I made arch-monarch of the world
For deeds of bounty or nobility.
But since I exercise a greater name,
The scourge of God and terror of the world,
I must apply myself to fit those terms,
In war, in blood, in death, in cruelty,
And plague such peasants as resist in me
The power of Heaven's eternal majesty.15

The tragedy of such a decree is that there is little in an instrument of torture for even its Master to love; Tamburlaine himself is the "hate" as well as the "scourge" of God.16 To be elected a scourge, in the end, is to be bound to the violation of one's own moral being, and it is no wonder that Hamlet thinks of this role as a punishment.

But by assuming that the punishment emanates from God Hamlet is virtually acknowledging that he deserves it, and this acknowledgment has persuaded some critics that he must be thinking back to a particular offense.17 No history of actual guilt need be postulated, however, to justify God in electing a scourge. The language in which the theory of the scourge was couched is often ambiguous, but it is a serious perversion to construe it as flouting the common doctrine by limiting God's choice to those who are "already so steeped in crime as to be past salvation."18 No guilt is so great as to overcome divine mercy, which, like all divine attributes, is infinite; indeed, it is precisely for blaspheming against this truth that despair is tradition-ally branded, in the words of Chaucer's Parson, as a "synnyng in the Hooly Ghoost," a disease to which even Claudius knows the antidote:

What if this curséd hand
Were thicker than itself with brother's blood,
Is there not rain enough in the sweet heavens
To wash it white as snow? whereto serves mercy
But to confront the visage of offence?

(III.iii.43-47)
And if there is no such thing as sinning too much to be saved, there is, correspondingly, no such thing as
sinning too little to be damned; "man," as Article IX has it, "is very far gone from original righteousness, and
of his own nature inclined to evil, so that the flesh lusteth always contrary to the spirit; and therefore in every
person born into this world, it deserveth God's wrath and damnation." Hamlet is plainly aware of this fact:
"Use every man after his desert and who shall 'scape whipping?" And Hamlet's views, we must bear in mind,
are solely in question here. Heaven, in short, is in no man's debt either for reward or for punishment. In both
justice and mercy God's will is unconfined. The ultimate reason why a particular sinner is chosen a scourge is
quite simply, in Hamlet's words, that "heaven hath pleas'd it so."

As conceived by the Prince, the divine pleasure currently in prospect—atrocity and perdition—is not merely
arbitrary but intolerably bleak. Does Hamlet allow himself no small ration of hope? It has been suggested that
when Hamlet says he is "scourge and minister" the latter term somehow denotes an alternative to the former.19
But this proposal has more good-will in it than grammar; a conjunction is a very strange way to add an
alternative. What we have here is ordinary hendiadys; Hamlet will be the kind of minister who scourges. A
more substantial consolation is held out by the Prince himself on his return from the sea, when he expresses a
new reverence for the "divinity that shapes our ends" and, by implication, a serene confidence that a
providential opportunity will, in the "interim," make "deep plots" unnecessary (V.ii.6-11, 73-74, 218-220).
The resolve to play a waiting game, to be sure, dates from his sparing of Claudius (III.iii.89-95); but the
serenity and the theological inflection are new, and they do not sound like a man expecting to be damned.
Moreover, on reconsidering Claudius' offenses, Hamlet no longer doubts that it is "perfect conscience / To
quit him with this arm" (V.ii.67-68). And far from being damned for usurping divine vengeance, Hamlet now
thinks it

    to be damned
    To let this canker of our nature come
    In further evil.

(11. 68-70)

The rehabilitation of Conscience, the statesmanlike appeal to the public welfare, and the clear implication that
Hamlet no longer thinks himself damned would appear to suggest that he has repudiated the role of scourge.
At closer quarters, unfortunately, two of these indices cancel each other out and the third can be otherwise
accounted for.

The same conscience that refuses to let Claudius "come in further evil" raises no objection, a few lines earlier,
to its owner's gratuitous murder of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern: "They are not near my conscience, their
defeat / Does by their own insinuation grow" (11. 58-59). But, as Hamlet seems to concede, Rosencrantz and
Guildenstern were clearly unaware of their complicity in his attempted murder, and insinuation is not a capital
crime.20 Hamlet showed himself well aware of this last when he repented of killing Polonius, another
"intruding fool" who "made love to his employment"; indeed that inadvertent crime was what persuaded him
of his election to the unenviable office of scourge. This falling off in the tenderness of Hamlet's conscience,
taken together with the double standard conveniently applied by that faculty, should perhaps remind us that a
Shakespearean character who invokes conscience in a doubtful cause is at least as likely to be perplexed in the
extreme as to have regained his moral bearings. Othello, too, at the lowest ebb of his moral awareness, argues
that he must kill to prevent his victim from "coming in further evil": "Yet she must die, else she'll betray more
men" (V.ii.6). But the difference between the two cases of rationalization is as instructive as the parallel;
Othello's disavowal of vindictive impulse may be suspect, but he does offer Desdemona the respite that is
indispensable to Christian execution:

    If you bethink yourself of any crime
    Unreconcil'd as yet to heaven and grace,
    Solicit for it straight.

If you bethink yourself of any crime
Unreconcil'd as yet to heaven and grace,
Solicit for it straight.
I would not kill thy unprepared spirit.
No, heaven forfend! I would not kill thy soul.
(11. 27-30, 31-32)

It is crucial to recognize that Hamlet, despite his new serenity, the fresh endorsement of his conscience, and his princely if intermittent concern for innocent bystanders, has not disavowed his intention to kill the soul of his enemy. Indeed, the health of his victims' souls has come to worry him so little that he sends even Rosencrantz and Guildenstern "to sudden death, / Not shriving time allowed" (V.ii.46-47). It is a commentary on his argument from statesmanship that he should fail so spectacularly in the end to avoid "coming in further evil" to the amount of three additional deaths, and that the assassination of Claudius should be so far removed in spirit from solemn execution.

By sinning against the Holy Ghost, Hamlet continues to play the part of a scourge. To see why he no longer expects to be damned for it we shall have to refer again to that view of God's absolute sovereignty which, as we saw earlier, underlies the very notion of a human scourge. In such a view the moral law is simply a creature of divine will subject to revocation by that will at any time. Sometimes even a Patriarch, as Augustine explains, might abrogate the ordinary law of God by God's extraordinary command—*ad personam pro tempore expressa iussione*. In performing such a command the Patriarch is like a sword that owes its assistance to him who wields it—*adminiculum gladius utenti*. And the only difference between the deed of the sword and the deed of the scourge is that the latter ends in damnation. In the Middle Ages the theory "that the heroes of the old covenant had a special command, or revelation from God," when their conduct "ran counter to the prevailing Christian ethics" was elaborated by Scotus, and passed on in substance to the theologians of the Reformation; though, like Scotus, Luther and Calvin denied that such dispensations can recur in the latter days. Hamlet is not so cautious. Not conscience ultimately but the "divinity that shapes our ends" (V.ii.10) condemns Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to a death by treachery in whose smallest detail, Hamlet is quite sure, "heaven" was "ordinant" (1. 48). Like Tamburlaine—or Abraham, for that matter—Hamlet is performing what is "enjoin'd me from above." But like Abraham he will not be damned. It would seem that the quest for a satisfactory way of defining his mission has inspired the Prince to a new flight of clairvoyance: what the mind of the ghost has withheld Hamlet reads in the mind of God. And what he reads—in dread at first, and later in tranquillity—is naked will beyond good and evil.

VI

In pursuance of his vow Horatio eventually offers his hearers an index to his projected relation of Hamlet's career in revenge:

> so shall you hear
> Of carnal, bloody, and unnatural acts,
> Of accidental judgements, casual slaughters,
> Of deaths put on by cunning and forced cause,
> And, in this upshot, purposes mistook
> Fain on the inventors' heads.
> (V.ii.378-383)

"Plots and errors," as he sums things up, lie behind the present "mischance" (11. 392-393). We have seen Hamlet elbow-deep in the plots, and he has not been notably innocent of the errors. Claudius, to be sure, has been guilty "of carnal, bloody, and unnatural acts," and both he and Laertes of "purposes mistook / Fain on the inventors' heads." But this does not absolve their opponent "of accidental judgements, casual slaughters, / Of deaths put on by cunning and forced cause." Horatio will no doubt proceed to excuse the latter; that is why he has deferred his felicity. But if he intends to go further, and justify them, his list is perversely calculated to
obscure the fact.

What Shakespeare's audience paid for, undoubtedly, was a hectic afternoon of sensation, and this, at the outset, is what they got. The necessary thrill was provided by the morally neutral question of modus operandi: what grizzly end will Hamlet think up for the villain? And it was clearly necessary that the question remain morally neutral if the thrill was not to be spoiled. But it is not long before Shakespeare spoils it, or rather replaces it with a new question and a new order of suspense. For when the Prince asks himself which of two alternative courses more befits a great soul—which is "nobler in the mind"—he compels us to recognize him as a serious moral agent and (if we have not al-ready begun to do so) to worry about him in a new way. The new worry, indeed, is nearly the opposite of the old; we worry lest Hamlet betray his commitment to the faculty of "noble mind" to which he pays such high tribute: the "apprehension" as of a god (II.ii.310), the "large discourse" (IV.iv.36), the "fair judgement, / Without the which," as Claudius agrees, "we are pictures, or mere beasts" (IV.v.84-85). "Discourse of reason," as Hamlet's training prepares him to understand its practical function, is not merely a prudential, but a moral faculty as well—though he assumes that a degree of morality may be expected even of "a beast that wants discourse of reason" (I.ii.150). There is thus a disturbing irony in the spectacle of an "antic disposition" that moves Ophelia to recall "what a noble mind is here o'erthrown" (III.i.153). For the "noble and most sovereign reason" (I.160) whose decline we are to be shown is not the prudential acuteness in which Hamlet increasingly takes pride, but the "nobility," the "conscience," the right reason that this very pride will slowly submerge. The Hamlet whose fall from grace we may well regret is not the tactical improviser who cries out: "O, 'tis most sweet / When in one line two crafts directly meet" (III. iv.209-210), but the man even his enemy thinks of as "most generous, and free from all contriving" (IV.vii.134), the humane Prince whose gorge rises at the cynicism of the grave-digger tossing about the remains of the dead: "Did these bones cost no more the breeding, but to play at loggats with them? mine ache to think on't" (V.i.89-90). It is difficult to recognize in this man the very different figure that is discovered preparing to "lug the guts into the neighbour room" (III.iv.212), or, for tactical purposes, playing hide-and-seek with them later on (IV.ii.29-30). And it is difficult to reconcile the Hamlet who protests in one scene that he is "not splenitive and rash" (V.i.255) with the advocate of "rashness" in the next (V.ii.7). Last and most important, it is difficult to reconcile the Christian and the man of charity with the avenger. Or rather, it is disturbing to have to reconcile these things. For the worser part is always threatening to prevail.

"Yet have I in me something dangerous, / Which let thy wiseness fear" (V.i.256-257). The irony of this advice is that its author never takes it himself. In the pride of his intellect, he hopes to find his unknown duty by seeking what is immeasurably less known: "For what man knoweth the things of a man, saue the spirit of man, which is in him? euen so the things of God knoweth no man, but the Spirit of God" (I Cor. ii.11). The vision of deity that results from this quest, as we have seen, is blasphemously partial; it sacrifices infinite goodness on the altar of infinite might. And the vision of duty that results from this warped vision of God is equally troubling to the onlooker. The tragedy of Hamlet, in short, is a tragedy of spiritual decline arrested only by the brief madness of the Prince's last anger. We are relieved by the reflex violence of an act that would be abhorrent to us if it were deliberate—if it were, that is, the sterile act of hatred we have been waiting for.

Shakespeare has left the identity of the ghost a matter of conjecture, however straightforward, and this should warn us that the importance of that figure is not its identity but its effect on Hamlet, which is to test the Prince more cannily than the Prince ever contrives to test anyone else. It is by his interpretation of the ghost that Hamlet is tried and found wanting. If the lure of idle speculation persists, it may be diverting to imagine a Prologue in Heaven, in which God grants Mephistopheles dominion over Hamlet in terms like those of the corresponding scene in Goethe's Faust: "Draw this mind from its fountainhead, and lead it off, if you can get hold of it, your own way. And stand ashamed when you are brought to acknowledge that a good man in his dark striving remembers the right way." In Hamlet's case, I would suggest, the devil would have feared no such humiliation, nor would God have added the wager; for the darkly striving Prince, though he is saved, is no better than the rest of us.
Notes

1 The text of Hamlet from which I quote is the Cambridge edition, ed. John Dover Wilson (Cambridge, Eng., 1936). The present essay was written before the appearance of Eleanor Presser's study Hamlet and Revenge (Stanford, 1967), to which some of my observations and working assumptions are parallel in tendency, though the frame of reference and the conclusions differ radically.

2 Ethica Nicomachea, 1100a 18-21, 1101a 22sq., 1101b 5-9. Cf. Pindar, 01. VIII. 77-80.


5 For a different view see Levin, p. 147.

6 All Biblical quotations are taken from the Geneva Bible.

7 The Works of the Learned Sir Thomas Brown, Kt. (London, 1686), II (1685), 38. (See Kenelm Digby's "observation," p. 78.)

8 Giovanni Battista Possevino, Dialogo dell'honore (Venice, 1565), pp. 500, 503, sg., 515, 521.

9 I H. IV I.ii.92-93.

10 I H. IV III.ii.147-152.

11 John Donne, who does not scorn it, reminds us in two separate places that "all honors from inferiors flow," and that God Himself, Who is the fountain of intrinsic value, has only such honor as His creatures grant Him. See Poems, ed. Grierson (Oxford, 1912), I, 218, 263.


13 Ecclus. xiv.6. Cf. Lactantius, Patrologia Latina VI, 407; "Nam si homicida nefarius est, quia hominis extinstector est, eidem sceleri obstrictus est, qui se necat, quia hominem necat. Imo vero maius esse id facinus existimandum est, cuius ultio Deo soli subiacet."


16 Tamburlaine, p. 146. See Roy W. Battenhouse, Marlowe's Tamburlaine (Nashville, Tenn., 1941), pp. 108-113, 129-133, and Ariosto, Orlando Furioso XVII. It is interesting that one of the texts adduced by Erasmus to illustrate the concept fits Claudius far better than Hamlet: "Fortassis illud est quod ait Job cap. xxxiv. Qui regnare facit hypocritam, propter peccata populi." See Colloquia, ed. Schrevelius (Amsterdam, 1693), p. 133. The scourgeship of Claudius, in view of Hamlet's mission, would add a particularly mordant irony to the play; vengeance on the Scourge, all the authorities agree, is reserved to God alone.


18 Bowers, p. 743.
Bowers, p. 745: "we may see … the anomalous position Hamlet conceives for himself: is he to be the private-revenger scourge or the public-revenger minister?"

Claudius reveals his plan in soliloquy rather than dialogue after dismissing R. and G. (IV.iii.57 ff.); moreover, once they lose Hamlet to the pirates R. and G. would hardly bother to deliver Claudius' letter if they knew what was in it.

*De Civitate Dei*, p. 36 sq., p. 42.


**Michael Cameron Andrews ( essay date 1978)**


[Here, Andrews argues that in Hamlet Shakespeare was not necessarily leveling a moral judgment on revenge, and likely intended to arouse tragic emotions in his audience and their approval of his hero.]

*Hamlet* is a highly personal play. We bring to it all that we are. As L. C. Knights has observed, "more than with any other play, critics are in danger of finding reflected what they bring with them." The gratifications of interpretation may turn out to be gratifications of another sort; instead of serving the play, we are likely to make it serve us. Kenneth Muir, commenting on C. S. Lewis' view of *Hamlet*, emphasizes this danger: "It was inevitable, Lewis thinks, that Coleridge should ascribe to Hamlet his own weaknesses; it was equally inevitable that the pacifists should regard Hamlet as a pacifist, and that the Freudians should diagnose their favourite complex. To Lewis, the explanation is that Hamlet is not an individual at all, but Everyman, haunted by the fear of being dead, and burdened by original sin. But Lewis's theory, ingenious as it is, invites the retort that he too, the amateur theologian, has saddled Hamlet with his own pre-possessions." Both protagonist and play, one may add, have appealed to one of our current prepossessions. Valuing multiplicity of meaning as we do, we hold *Hamlet* in our heart of hearts. It is a play in which many meanings dance. And, of course, since *Hamlet* has so much in it, critics are encouraged to find more—something overlooked, misconstrued, or imperfectly sensed by previous writers.

Contemplating the vast outpouring of heterogeneous commentary, Elder Olson began a discussion of *Hamlet* with the melancholy observation: "In the present condition of *Hamlet* studies, it is almost useless to offer one more interpretation of the play." Yet the play persists; like its portentous Ghost, it would be spoke to. And much of what has been written in the years since Olson's essay confirms the soundness of his diagnosis of the state of *Hamlet* criticism: "… problems, methods, and solutions of the most fantastic order seem often to be given an authority equal to or even greater than that of the most solid scholarship, as if the criteria on which authority depended were novelty and ingenuity rather than cogency of proof (p. 225).

Inevitably, of course, all readers and critics of *Hamlet* must form some opinion concerning what may be called the play's attitude toward Hamlet and his revenge. And it is here, I think, that the temptation to read our pre-possessions into the play is particularly strong. Since many critics regard blood revenge as a great evil, they contend—to state the matter most simply—that Hamlet should either abstain from vengeance altogether, or undertake it in the proper spirit. For some only the former would suffice; for others, Hamlet may emerge from the play a noble and sweet prince if he can achieve vengeance without tainting his mind with hatred—if, in short, he learns to act as God's minister rather than out of personal vindictiveness. There are two schools of
thought as to whether Hamlet passes this test, though most critics join Fredson Bowers in answering in the affirmative.

The most influential recent discussion of this subject is Eleanor Prosser's *Hamlet and Revenge*. Because of my profound disagreement with the critical approach her book represents, I should like to indicate some of the fundamental differences in our premises.

I agree with Prosser that "our truest guide to understanding *Hamlet* is our intuitive response" (p. xiii). But I disagree as to the nature of this response. Like some others before her, she argues for a dual response: emotional approval followed by moral judgment. "Is it not at least possible," she inquires, "that the Elizabethan audience could instinctively identify with the revenger and yet—either at the same time or later, when released from emotional involvement—judge him, too?" (p. 34). This sounds plausible enough—until one realizes that Presser means post-theatrical judgment as well as responses experienced during a performance. To speak of judgment during a play is one thing; it is true, for example, that our attitude toward *Richard III* and *Macbeth* changes; in a sense, we kill with them, but are dissociated from them before the end of the play, so that each dies alone. For both of them, there is judgment within the play. The idea that a moral judgment arrived at after a play has equal authority is, I feel sure, a dangerous one—dangerous because we are only too eager to substitute our own moral notions for the dramatic experience created by the playwright and actors.

Even in the case of judgment within the context of the play, the degree of distancing required entails a marked loss in tragic effect. Judgment and the tragic emotions, as A. C. Bradley long ago pointed out, have little to do with each other: "When we are immersed in a tragedy, we feel toward dispositions, actions, and persons such emotions as attraction and repulsion, pity, wonder, fear, horror, perhaps hatred; but we do not judge." What has happened, I believe, in much recent criticism of *Hamlet* is a rebellion against the immersion of which Bradley is speaking. We are not likely, nowadays, to hear that Hamlet moves us because we feel ourselves in him, or him in us. Reacting against our natural tendency to identify with Hamlet, critics strive to maintain a judicial attitude. Hamlet has been moved from the heart's core to the realm of the other.

Even so, Shakespeare makes it difficult to bring Hamlet to the bar. For the main objection to sitting in judgment on Hamlet is *Hamlet*. The judicial critic is in the awkward position of warning us not to be taken in by effects the playwright evidently sought to achieve. Even John Vyvyan, for example, who argues that Hamlet disowns his higher nature in seeking vengeance, candidly remarks: "Hamlet is so fully successful in hypnotizing himself that he partially hypnotizes the audience as well. We have to pinch ourselves awake in order not to accept his valuation of the other characters." Whether or not we are desirous to be pinched, the judicial critic strives to pinch us to our senses. But the playwright, not the critic, must release us from tragic involvement—if he desires—and free us for judgment. When he does so he is about other business than tragedy. In *Hamlet*, the evidence suggests that Shakespeare was about tragedy.

Judgment within a play is something over which the dramatist exercises control. This is not the case with our reflections after—or outside—the play. Thus, if Tamburlaine is made magnificent in the theater, how relevant is the post-theatrical judgment that we really should not admire that sort of man? When we talk of withdrawing moral approval from what we were seduced into accepting during the play, we are probably saying that we don't like the dramatist's ideas, not that we were insufficiently alert to the nuances of his play. The double response theory, with its hot baths of emotionalism followed by cold showers of judgment, has little to recommend it when the cold shower is not turned on by the dramatist. In the case of revenge tragedy, as I shall explain, the danger of distorting our actual experience of the play is particularly acute.

Roughly one-third of *Hamlet and Revenge*, for example, deals with "Elizabethan Attitudes towards Revenge." The purpose of this investigation, as stated in the preface, is to counteract the erroneous impressions fostered by previous scholarship: "The dominant critical tradition has explicitly told us: 'Forget your own ethical code.
The study of certain facts indicates that it is irrelevant in *Hamlet.* The facts, I submit, tell us exactly the opposite" (p. xiv). What the "facts" reveal, in short, is that we should set aside the red spectacles prescribed for us by revenge-ethnic critics. By using our own unaided vision we will see better. For the Elizabehans responded to *Hamlet* in the same way that we will—once we learn to trust our instinctive response.

But what, according to Presser, did the Elizabethans believe? These are her findings for the society in which *Hamlet* was written: "... on the subject of revenge, [Shakespeare's] plays reflect agreement with sermons, moralist tracts, poetry, and other plays of his day. No matter how base the injury, no matter how evil your enemy, no matter how dim all hope of legal redress, leave the issue to Heaven; God's is the quarrel" (p. 94).

It is somewhat disconcerting to discover that the chase had this beast in view. The Elizabethans saw their plays through moral spectacles (at least in retrospect); we share their opposition to revenge as something barbaric and unchristian. In both cases, aversion to revenge is considered instinctive.

So described, man is a creature who has taken his civilization straight; savagery and violence have lost their primordial appeal, in thought as well as in deed. The most that such a man can do at a revenge play is to grant temporary sympathy to what he cannot ultimately condone.

But is this *man?* Eric Bentley, commenting on the revenge theme in *Hamlet,* has noted the fundamental ambiguity of our response: "There is an unresolved ambiguity here which is not that of the play alone, or even of its author: it is the ambiguity of a whole civilization—a civilization that has never made up its mind but has a double, nay, a triple, standard: preaching forgiveness, while believing in justice, while practicing revenge." The Christian tradition, it is true, attempts to replace hatred with love, revenge with forgiveness; vengeance itself should be left to God. "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, saith the Lord." Yet, as Freud has observed, "What no human soul desires there is no need to prohibit; it is automatically excluded. The very emphasis of the commandment *Thou shalt not kill* makes it certain that we spring from an endless ancestry of murderers, with whom the lust for killing was in the blood, as possibly it is to this day with ourselves." The problem, according to Freud, is our unwillingness to admit what we are: "Our unconscious is just as inaccessible to the idea of our own death, as murderously minded towards the stranger, as divided or ambivalent towards the loved, as was man in earliest antiquity. But how far we have moved from this primitive state in our conventionally civilized attitude towards death! ... Is it not for us to confess that in our civilized attitude towards death we are once again living psychologically beyond our means, and must reform and give truth its due?" (p. 234). Presser, who would grant our "conventionally civilized attitude" toward revenge the status of an instinct, seems unaware of any conflict between profession and reality; her theory of audience response thus requires precisely the self-deception Freud considered "psychologically beyond our means."

It seems to me, on the contrary, that audiences are fully capable of responding to revenge tragedy for reasons that have nothing to do with conventional morality or religious ethics. Quite simply, audiences find the drama of "one [character] who has done something and one who is going to get him because he has done it" deeply satisfying. Many Elizabethan revenge plays are entirely consonant with the moral and religious precepts of the age; they are, in a sense, cautionary works. But my concern here is to emphasize the existence of another kind of revenge play, more savage than didactic, appealing to the instinctual side of man. This form of revenge tragedy encourages the audience to indulge the instinctive desire to requite violence with violence. Setting aside its panoply of precepts, the audience could feel what it must, not what it ought to feel.

In the Elizabethan period, to be sure, the truer form is the rarer form. It would be most surprising if the religious and moral thought of the period had not impressed itself on the drama, leading to many plays in which revenge was presented as evil. But this is only to say that dramatists showed themselves ready to give audiences what they were supposed to want (and quite possibly thought they wanted) instead of meeting a deeper, more inarticulate need. Indeed, it could be argued that the religious temper of the age heightened the need for some means of indulging the very instincts that were, by general agreement, immoral. Thus an
Elizabethan audience might enter the theater believing that revenge should be left to God but, caught in the
dark music of the play, become vicarious participants in violence. This is the reason for the enormous
emotional appeal of the revenge play in its pure and savage form, before didacticism sets in. The implacable
emotional logic of blood for blood is at the heart of revenge tragedy. What is denied in civilized life is
furnished in the theater. Revenge tragedy speaks to unaccommodated man, and what our response reveals
about us is not pleasant to contemplate. The revenger raises his sword. The audience leans forward for the kill.
It is not a time for compunction. We are given what we desire. In that sense, at least, vengeance is ours.

I have said that the double response theory, suspect in general terms, is particularly misleading when applied
to Elizabethan revenge tragedy. It should now be evident why this is so. A man may respond, while in the
theater, to ideas with which he would not normally be in sympathy. If his response does not imply
ambivalence in an area where ambivalence is forbidden, he may be willing to admit that he was so caught up
in the play that he temporarily accepted its standards; in the real world, he feels sure, he would react
differently. But suppose the play appeals to what a man actually feels, but cannot admit feeling, even to
himself? When the spectator, his dream of passion ended, re-enters the world of the preacher and the
moralist, what might he be likely to do? In such a case, surely, the tendency would be to attempt to rationalize
the nature of the experience. But, for all that, the experience would still be there. It happened; it was true.
And, at another performance, it would happen again—unless he refused to yield himself to the play.

To this point I have mainly been speaking theoretically. But there is evidence that the Elizabethans found, in
the theater, the kind of freedom I have been describing. At a comedy, for example, there would be no reason
to suppose that audiences responded in a manner consonant with moral and religious precepts. Something of a
moral holiday is surely suggested by Stephen Gosson's complaint: "… in the theaters they generally take up a
wonderful laughter, and shout all together with one voice, when they see some notable cosenage practised, or
some sly conveyance of bawdry brought out of Italy. Whereby they show themselves rather to like it than to
reprove it." Gosson is admittedly no impartial witness, but he would hardly risk destroying his credibility by
misrepresenting audience response. On the basis of their experience in the theater, many of his readers would
be able to judge for themselves.

But to delight in gullery or bawdry is relatively harmless; few would be as strict as Gosson. To delight in
blood revenge is a more serious matter. Yet some plays show themselves rather to like it than rebuke it—and
audiences responded to these plays with considerable enthusiasm.

Irving Ribner, like Prosser, has emphasized that the Elizabethan revenge play is usually moral as well as
bloody: "While audiences may have delighted above all in the sensationalism and spectacle of horror, the
heroes of such plays … tended to vitiate themselves by the very act of vengeance-seeking and to die as fully
tainted by evil as the villains who had injured them." Revenge was, after all, the prerogative of God. Yet, in
a passage anticipated by Freud's remarks on the implications of Thou shalt not kill, Ribner goes on to note the
possible significance of the age's tendency to protest too much: "The vengeance of God inevitably will be
executed, even by the sinner upon himself should there be no other means. We need not assume that this was a
document to which all Elizabethans assented; the very need of Tudor moralists constantly to assert it may
suggest that many theatre-goers could sympathize with the blood revenger" (p. liii). "Traffic lights," as a
social anthropologist has remarked, "are not found where there are no automobiles." What is implicit in the
repeated admonitions of the moralists is sometimes explicit in the plays. If "the sweet violence of a tragedy"
in Sidney's phrase was unleavened by the addition of moral judgment, audiences could indulge this
sympathy and share the revenger's bloody triumph without any necessity of judging him or themselves.

The Spanish Tragedy, which with Titus Andronicus established revenge tragedy on the Elizabethan stage,
reveals at least as much about underlying attitudes toward blood revenge as many volumes of sermons. Kyd's
drama affords ample proof that audiences did not require their violence seasoned with moral judgment when
the cause was great and the revenger a man with whom they could identify. Philip Edwards, who has gone
even so far as to say "The only essential reading for Hamlet is (besides Hamlet) The Spanish Tragedy," elsewhere writes of the play's "power … to lull an Elizabethan conscience while it was being performed": "It could well be said … that it is a poor play which depends on the audience suspending its belief in law and mercy. And yet a swingeing revenge-play has its own emotional satisfaction for the audience. Vengeance is exacted from evil-doers by a man whose wrongs invoke pity; in enabling an audience to forget their daily docility and to share in Hieronimo's violent triumph, it may be that Kyd has justified him-self as an artist more than he would have done in providing a sermon on how irreligious it is to be vindictive." That would seem a just assessment of what the play does for its audience. It is pointless to insist that Hieronimo is guilty of criminal violence. Of course he is—but not in the world of the play. Instead of presenting him as he would appear in conventional moral terms, the play portrays his vengeance, terrible though it is, with approbation rather than censure. Hieronimo has done what he had to do, and he was right to do it. His death is not the seal of his guilt but a rite of passage, for we are told that in Elysium his anguish will be metamorphosed to eternal bliss: 

"Andrea… I'll lead Hieronimo where Orpheus plays, / Adding sweet pleasure to eternal days" (IV.v.23-24).

The enemies of Andrea, and of Hieronimo, on the other hand, will be tormented in "deepest hell." Thus is the audience encouraged to share, as in a dream, the passion and triumph of Hieronimo, who slays his enemies in this life and sends them to punishment in the next.

Shakespeare is often considered too enlightened, too humane, to write approvingly of revenge. L. C. Knights, for example, declares himself unable to believe that Shakespeare "could temporarily waive his deepest ethical convictions for the sake of an exciting dramatic effect." That Shakespeare was in the business of providing exciting dramatic effects does not deter Knights: "It is almost like believing that Dante, for a canto or two, could change his ground and write approvingly, say, of the enemies of the Empire." Without claiming any special insights into Shakespeare's "deepest ethical convictions," Prosser turns directly to his plays; she concludes that, as Shakespeare cannot be said to approve of blood revenge in any of his other plays, such approval should not be taken for granted in Hamlet: "In all this evidence … we find no suggestion that Shakespeare expected his audience to accept without question the validity of private blood revenge. The evidence suggests, rather, that his plays rely on the orthodox ethical and religious injunctions against it. Despite a maturing of both dramatic skill and thought between Titus Andronicus and The Tempest, the portrayal of the revenger seems to remain constant. Titus and Prospero are two sides of the same coin" (p. 93).

The problem is not simply failure to distinguish between revenge tragedy as a form and plays which merely employ revenge motifs. Though little can be learned about Shakespeare's dramatic attitude toward revenge by comparing works as unlike in intention as Titus and The Tempest, no harm would be done if the revenge play received its due. It should not be treated as an adumbration of what is in reality quite another play; that "the rarer action is / In virtue than in vengeance" is true enough of The Tempest—but that is in another dramatic country. Furthermore, Prosser's description of Shakespeare's "portrayal of the revenger" is of doubtful validity. At least two plays—Titus and Macbeth—take a far more favorable view of revenge than she is willing to allow.

Titus Andronicus, Shakespeare's only real revenge tragedy besides Hamlet, carries blood revenge as far as it can go: blood is poured not by the cup, but by the bellyful. Like The Spanish Tragedy, Titus is used by Prosser as an example of how the revenger becomes corrupted and loses the audience's approval. The killing of Demetrius and Chiron is the turning point: "From this point on [Titus] is, if not a 'villain-revenger,' at least a tainted revenger who has forfeited our sympathy" (p. 88). Yet, in this instance, Prosser has been induced to relax some measure of her usual moral rigor: apparently she would approve of Titus' vengeance if he were not quite so cruel: "The murder of Tamora's two vicious cubs would, in itself, undoubtedly call for our instinctive applause. But when Titus … stops their mouths to prevent any pleas (a typical villain's device in Renaissance drama) and then taunts them with his ghastly plans to make mush of their bones and blood, mold it around their severed heads, and serve the tempting 'pasties' to their mother—the stomach of the most hardened spectator would surely rise." Before the play is over, she asserts, "Titus has lost all claim to virtue" (p. 88).
I do not deny that strong stomachs are in order. Yet it seems very likely that many in the audience cheered Titus' stratagem for its grisly propriety rather than responding with horrified revulsion. For Titus Andronicus, like The Spanish Tragedy, presents personal vengeance in a manner that accentuates the revenger's bloody triumph rather than his moral guilt. When Titus finally acts, he does not forfeit his moral position in the play: he is a good man, his enemies embodiments of evil (something of this is surely conceded by Prosser in her reference to "vicious cubs"). By the time suffering changes to action, the previous events of the play have created in the audience an emotional need for a vengeance which will provide adequate restitution; we have been given, so to speak, the formula for Titus' vengeance. Titus in his cook's attire may be grotesque enough, but he is serving what we want.

Neither Titus nor Hieronimo survives his revenge. Un-like Hieronimo, who takes his own life, Titus is slain after revealing what Tamora has fed on and stabbing her to death. Saturninus kills Titus, and is in turn slain by Lucius, who avenges his father: "Can the son's eye behold his father bleed? / There's meed for meed, death for a deadly deed" (V.iii.55-56). Set in such a context, it is difficult to see Titus' death as evidence of his moral guilt. The revenger dies, and is revenged; instead of being punished, Lucius becomes the next emperor of Rome.

From a dramatic point of view, Shakespeare may be said to hurry past the death of Titus; it is perfunctory, undeveloped. Yet it is clearly necessary to remove Titus from the play. In securing vengeance, he has ended his reason for living: death comes as no catastrophe, but as a triumphant departure at the full flood-tide of emotional vindication. He can hardly be imagined living on. In his vengeance is his end. His death, in this sense, is like Hieronimo's.

There is another reason why Titus must die. Though in the theater, where spectators are confronted with dramatic impressions rather than legal evidence, for Titus to be struck down at this moment is no punishment for criminal misdeeds; in life such a man would stand condemned by law. Titus' death, while not imposed by us, neatly solves the problem of what to do with him at the end of the play. For him to face formal judgment would oblige the spectator to judge: the world of the play would be set against the world of Elizabethan justice. According to the latter, Titus should be condemned to death; for the play to spare him would seem unjust, if not morally outrageous. But by making Titus fall by Saturninus' hand, Shakespeare prevents the question of Titus' guilt from becoming an issue: it is not an issue because it is never really raised. Hence Titus remains a good man even as he betters the instructions of his sadistic tormentors. As Marcus, "the reverent man of Rome," says of his brother's vengeance:

Now judge what cause had Titus to revenge
These wrongs unspeakable, past patience,
Or more than any living man could bear. …
Have we done aught amiss, show us
wherein. …

(V.iii. 125-29)

It is Titus' unspeakable wrongs, the justice of his cause, that we remember. We judge the cause, not the legality of vengeance. Titus never loses his "claim to virtue."

For Prosser, as we have seen, a character who sheds blood for blood forfeits this claim: Shakespeare would not have us approve of him. Hence when she comes to discuss the revenge motif in Macbeth there is an obvious problem: how does Macduff, who might seem an exception to her rule, escape condemnation? The answer must be dealt with at some length, for Prosser is aware that the play is a crucial one, a "test case," for her theory. Although Macbeth is often "cited as evidence that Shakespeare unquestioningly accepted the morality of revenge," she argues that the play contains "only one passage [which] can be offered in support of a revenge ethic. In his soliloquy on the battlefield, Macduff roars for Macbeth to show himself, swearing
that if someone else has stolen from him the right to kill the tyrant, 'my wife and children's ghosts will haunt me still'" (pp. 90-91). Prosser is quite frankly unable to account for this: "In the light of the rest of the play, I find the speech a contradiction. Elsewhere, the denial of personal revenge motives to Macduff is explicit" (p. 91).

But if the speech is out of character it is an odd place for Shakespeare to be careless. Is the evidence as explicit as Prosser believes? Here is her view of Macduff's motives: "Even when Macduff learns of the slaughter of his wife and children, his major reaction is stunned grief. He is angry at himself for exposing them to danger, not at the man who murdered them" (p. 91). Such a Macduff would indeed want the natural touch. But let us consider Macduff's actual response to the revelation that his family has been slaughtered:

\[\textit{Macd. My children too?}\]
\[\textit{Rosse. Wife, servants, all}\]
\[\text{That could be found.}\]
\[\textit{Macd} \quad \text{And I must be from thence!}\]
\[\text{My wife kill'd too?}\]
\[\textit{Rosse. I have said.}\]
\[\textit{Mal. Be comforted:}\]
\[\text{Let's make us med'cines of our great revenge,}\]
\[\text{To cure this deadly grief.}\]
\[\textit{Macd. He has no children.—All my pretty ones?}\]
\[\text{Did you say all?—O Hell-kite!—All? …}\]
\[\text{(IV.iii.211-17)}\]

It seems to me that "And I must be from thence!" is rather an outcry of baffled pain (Why couldn't I have been there!) than of anger. But what is of crucial importance is Macduff's enigmatic response to Malcolm's suggestion that he cure his grief by taking revenge. Professor Muir, who gives three possible readings, prefers the one a blood-revenger would intend: Macbeth, that is, has no children to be slain in requital. However this may be, the speech is followed by an unequivocal burst of anger, for one presumes that "Hell-kite" is not a term of self-reproach.

Not that Macduff does not blame himself. It seems to him that such innocents would never have been allowed to perish if Heaven were not using their deaths to punish him for his own sins:

\[\text{Did Heaven look on,}\]
\[\text{And would not take their part? Sinful}\]
\[\text{Macduff!}\]
\[\text{They were all struck for thee. Naught that I}\]
\[\text{am,}\]
\[\text{Not for their own demerits, but for mine,}\]
\[\text{Fell slaughter on their souls. …}\]
\[\text{(IV.iii.223-27)}\]

But when Malcolm redirects his attention to Macbeth—"Be this the whetstone of your sword: let grief / Convert to anger; blunt not the heart, enrage it" (11. 228-29)—Macduff again turns his thoughts to vengeance:

\[\text{… gentle Heavens,}\]
\[\text{Cut short all intermission; front to front,}\]
\[\text{Bring thou this fiend of Scotland, and myself;}\]
\[\text{Within my sword's length set him. …}\]
This, Prosser remarks, is as close as Macduff comes to "a vow of personal revenge" (p. 91). But while there is piety in it—as she notes, it is a prayer—there is also something else. Of course Macbeth is the country's enemy, but Macduff also clearly hates him for imperative personal reasons. The ending of his speech, not quoted by Prosser, emphasizes this aspect of his motivation: "... if he 'scape, / Heaven forgive him too!" (11. 234-35). These lines, surely, suggest implacable hatred.

Nor does the end of the play show Macduff in a more charitable spirit. When finally given the chance to confront Macbeth with self-comparisons, he charges the "Hell-hound" to battle. They fight on even terms until Macduff's revelation of the manner of his birth. Now Macbeth refuses to fight. But Macduff, refusing to let his vengeance slip from him, taunts Macbeth into continuing. If justice were all he sought, Macduff might ask his enemy to yield in other words than these:

Then yield thee, coward,
And live to be the show and gaze o' th' time:
We'll have thee, as our rarer monsters are,
Painted upon a pole, and underwrit,
"Here may you see the tyrant."

(V.viii.23-27)

Goaded beyond endurance, Macbeth is induced to "try the last"; Macduff re-enters with the head of his enemy. The time is free, but so is Macduff. He has had his revenge.

We may now return to Prosser's view of the play. Macbeth, she asserts, does not contradict her theory that Shakespeare never approves of personal revenge. It is true that Macduff emerges untainted, but only because he is no blood revenger: "... all is surrendered to the will of Heaven. The ... campaign is to be seen as a divine mission, not as a campaign of personal vengeance."

The play suggests it is both. Instead of supporting Prosser's argument, Macduff remains a step on which she must fall down, or else o'erleap, for in her way he lies. To anticipate Hamlet: Macduff is prompted to his revenge by excitements of his reason and his blood. He is no impersonal minister, but what he is doing is just.

The plum survives its poems, Hamlet its critics. Yet if we accept invitations to approach this highly personal play by way of its background, wariness is appropriate. When this background includes other plays, we should remember that these plays are things in themselves: breadth of scholarship, though giving an imposing sense of solidity, cannot provide assurance that a writer is examining the evidence with impartial eyes. For as we have seen, special pleading may assume the pleasing shape of scholarly objectivity; the "background" may be construed according to one's prepossessions. Here too we may find, in Olson's phrase, "novelty and ingenuity rather than cogency of proof."

William Troy once observed that the critic's "problem is always to discover the approach that will do least violence to the object before us, that will reconcile the greatest number of the innumerable aspects that every object presents to the understanding." If we wish to "do least violence" to Hamlet, we must examine in some detail how it shapes our responses—how it creates itself in our minds. This is not my purpose in the present essay. I have sought only to demonstrate that an Elizabethan audience did not necessarily respond to revenge in moral terms; that Shakespeare does not impose moral judgment on all his revengers; and that Hamlet would not be a startling play if it presented blood revenge in a way that aroused approval as well as sympathy. My point is not that Hamlet must be such a play, but that it could be. What shocks the virtuous philosopher may delight not only the chameleon poet, but the theatrical audience.
Notes


5 See especially Fredson Bowers, "Hamlet as Minister and Scourge," *PMLA*, 70 (1955), 740-49.


7 For example, she speaks of the way an audience "may have sympathized strongly with the very actions that later, in ensuing scenes or after the play, they strongly, if sadly condemned" (p. 73). (Italics added.)


10 Vyvyan, p. 45.

11 Prosser grants this possibility: "A skillful playwright can make even heresy attractive. *Tamburlaine* may be a case in point. An even better example … is *Bussy D'Ambois*" (p. 35).


13 See above, n. 7.


16 Cf. D. J. Palmer, *Renaissance Quarterly*, 21 (1968), 228: "There is an irony, perhaps unintentional, in Miss Prosser's use of the word 'instinct' to describe both Hamlet's desire for revenge and our own reactions to the play. … "

18 As Fredson Bowers remarks, "The public utterances of moralists and preachers insisted that revenge was evil, and the dramatists soon bowed to the doctrine." _Elizabethan Revenge Tragedy_ (Princeton, N.J., 1940), p. 279.

19 Cf. Bertrand Russell, "An Outline of Intellectual Rubbish," in _Unpopular Essays_ (New York, 1950), p. 108: "The doctrine, professed by many modern Christians, that everybody will go to heaven, ought to do away with the fear of death, but in fact this fear is too instinctive to be easily vanquished. F. W. H. Myers … questioned a woman who had lately lost her daughter as to what she supposed had become of her soul. The mother replied: 'Oh well, I suppose she is enjoying eternal bliss, but I wish you would not talk about such unpleasant subjects.'"

20 I have already mentioned _Tamburlaine_; see also


27 quote from the edition of Philip Edwards. Prosser's view of the play may be noted: "On the surface, the play seems an emphatic portrayal of the ravages of revenge, arousing increasing apprehension and horror in the audience as Hieronimo moves from excessive grief to rage to madness to crafty intrigue to demonic barbarism. Unfortunately, there are several contradictions" (pp. 51-52). This speech is one of them. Though she doubts that Hieronimo appeared "wholly justified" to Kyd's audience, she admits to uncertainty: "we can never be sure exactly how the Elizabethans judged Hieronimo" (p. 52).

28 L. C. Knights, _An Approach to "Hamlet,"_ p. 46. Knights goes on to assert: "If this ghost turns out to be one who clamours for revenge, then we have every reason to suppose that Shakespeare entertained some grave doubts about him." See also

29 Cf. Coursen (n. 4 above).


In The Spanish Tragedy, Kyd's use of a pagan frame helps to separate the play from life. As Philip Edwards notes in the introduction to his edition, "Kyd creates, and successfully sustains, his own world of revenge, and attitudes are sanctioned which might well be deplored in real life. The moral world of the play is a make-believe world; the gods are make-believe gods" (p. lix).

Prosser's other test case is King Lear; there, as she demonstrates, Edgar fulfills her requirements.


See Muir's note at IV.iii.216.

P. 91. Prosser concedes, however (p. 91n), that we are later told that "revenges burn" in both Macduff and Malcolm; but she dismisses this as "an offstage action."


Especially regrettable, therefore, is Prosser's advice to the reader who is not "particularly interested in historical backgrounds" (pp. xiv-xv). She would have this reader—and one fears he is legion—refer to her summaries rather than the evidence on which they are based: "If … he feels comfortable with the perspective established in each summary, I urge that he skip all the background material and move immediately to Part II and the discussion of Hamlet" (p. xv).


Harry Keyishian (essay date 1995)


[In the following excerpt, Keyishian observes that Hamlet is a "good revenger" who succeeds in avenging his father's death while maintaining his moral integrity.]

COMPETING AGENDAS IN HAMLET

One of the most striking aspects of revenge tragedy is its evocation of the protagonist's struggle to marshall his or her moral, psychological, material, and tactical resources—"cause, and will, and strength, and means" (Hamlet, 4.4.45)—to avenge a horrible wrong. Required to fulfill perilous duties they cannot avoid, working as they must outside the law, revengers confront extraordinary challenges that imperil their safety, integrity, and mental stability. They are wrenched from their normal ways of life and thrust by circumstance into new and unstable roles that overlie, without effacing, their earlier, "normal" selves. Audiences easily identify with characters facing such challenges, to the degree that the pursuit of revenge is task-specific and not grounded in chronic resentment or vindictiveness. "Good" revengers display a psychological capacity to live for affirmative, constructive goals from which the pursuit of revenge has only temporarily distracted them, and to which they could revert, if they survive, after completing their tasks. Titus, Lucrece, and Junius Brutus are that sort of avenger.

So is Hamlet. But because his circumstances are more complex and his psychology more deeply explored, his revenge is necessarily more problematical. In Titus Andronicus, Shakespeare followed Kyd in making his protagonist an elderly man who, initially at least, is socially established and personally secure. In Hamlet, by contrast, Shakespeare, like other turn-of-the-century writers of revenge plays, focuses on a young avenger.
who, though in the fullness of his physical and mental vigor, has fewer resources of personal experience and social standing to call upon and is assailed by self-doubt and self-blame. Commanded to action by the Ghost, at times intimidated by his task, Hamlet also struggles with discrepancies between his priorities and those of the Ghost. Differently situated in existence, differently victimized, and differently related to the objects of revenge, the two have somewhat different stakes in the revenge action. These problems fatally complicate Hamlet's efforts to fulfill a duty he cannot, on personal, familial, social, and moral grounds, evade.

Hamlet does regain his footing in time to satisfy both the Ghost's interests and his own, but the playwright's method of rescuing Hamlet from his dilemma is to shift from one mode of fiction to another: to let Hamlet move, in act 5, from a Machiavellian world order to a providential one.

THE GHOST'S AGENDA

Maurice Charney's comment that "the secret murder of Hamlet's father is represented as a dermatological event" is more than a witticism about the images of skin disease that permeate Hamlet; it also suggests the personal impact on the Ghost of his revolting disfigurement. He is offended by the manner of the murder, not only because of its treachery, but also and concretely because the poison Claudius used to kill him caused his body to be covered "Most lazar-like with vile and loathsome crust" (1.5.72). While it is very true that this is one of many such references in Hamlet that, according to Charney, "create a feeling of ulceration, leprosy, and cancer, all of which must be artfully concealed beneath smiling public appearances" (124), it seems clear that the violation of his "smooth body" in this repulsive way particularly oppresses and humiliates the murdered king and stands symbolically in his mind for the moral horror of the crime.

I take the Ghost to be the authentic spirit of Hamlet's late father, the national hero described by the reliable Horatio as a justifiably proud figure of great physical strength and courage. I accept Hamlet's view of him as well, as an "excellent" king and an ideal husband and father, "a man, take him for all in all" (1.2.139, 187). I take it, too, that within the world of Hamlet the Ghost expresses the moral order, that he has some sort of providential permission for what he is doing. What a humiliating fate for such a person to be disfigured so horribly, to have his life ended and his wife seduced by a betraying coward who would stoop to the use of poison, the most despised form of murder among Elizabethans.

The Ghost has, in addition, political motives for desiring revenge. He is outraged by the contamination of the state by an unworthy and unsuspected usurper: "the whole ear of Denmark / Is by a forged process of my death / Rankly abus'd" (1.5.36-38); the "royal bed of Denmark … [has become] a couch for luxury and damned incest" (82-83), not to mention drunkenness and general licentiousness. The Ghost also feels he has suffered a profound injustice: he endures torments in the afterlife (by his own account) not because he was worse than other men but because his sudden death prevented him from preparing spiritually for his end. It is to his credit that when making this complaint he acknowledges that he has committed unspecified "foul crimes" deserving of such punishment, thereby exonerating heaven from blame so that Hamlet will not be tempted to question its justice.

It is significant that the Ghost, simultaneously a suffering victim and a punishing authority, does not feel personally demoralized or diminished by the crime against him. Rather, he heaps indignant abuse upon the guilty from a position of moral and psychological security. His power to awe Horatio and the guards at Elsinore and, more crucially, to compel Hamlet's assent are evidences of his continued potency. Clearly, however, he would be diminished were his call to revenge ignored and Claudius left triumphant: he must succeed at initiating his killer's downfall. His self-confidence is founded on his justified faith that his noble son will take up his cause.

In his approach to revenge the Ghost displays a fundamental moral soundness, for though he resents the betrayals by his wife and his brother with equal passion, he meticulously differentiates between them when
evaluating their offenses. He desires to reform the confused sensualist Gertrude, whom he characterizes as weak rather than sinful, but he demands death for the regicide/fratricide Claudius: a life for a life for one who murdered to satisfy his ambition and lust. The Ghost's sense of perspective and his moral balance are impressive, and his continued affection for Gertrude is very touching; these qualities raise him above the criminal Claudius and at times above his son. Most significant, of course, is the Ghost's insistence that Hamlet not "taint" his mind in the course of taking revenge—a tall order, but absolutely necessary to achieve a moral resolution to the problem of Claudius' crimes and fully vindicate the honor of both father and son.

It is also significant that the Ghost appears right after Hamlet's bitter, heartfelt denunciation of the King's boisterous carousing late into the night, an activity that, Hamlet complains, reinforces the stereotyping of Danes as drunkards. Hamlet is saddened that "the stamp of one defect" (1.4.31), no matter how minor or accidental, may disgrace a nation or an individual in the eyes of the world. We are meant to assume, I think, that the Ghost's moment of entrance is not arbitrary, but that he has overheard and approves this speech, in which young Hamlet shows he has given intelligent thought to the question of honor, both national and individual, and understands that it may be affected by many events beyond human control: accidents of birth, chance, humors, compulsions. Hamlet's knowledge of these facts is very encouraging to the Ghost, who has had to learn them the hard way.

To enlist his son in his cause and set the conditions for revenge, the Ghost alludes to the "sulph'rous and tormenting flames" in which he is "confin'd to fast" (1.5.3, 11) and conveys the horror of his condition by suggesting how Hamlet would respond if he were actually to describe it: the "lightest word" of his suffering "Would harrow up thy soul, freeze thy young blood" (15-16). Hamlet's "Alas, poor ghost!" (4) is a fitting but not fully satisfactory reaction to the Ghost's revelations and demands. Hamlet, if he loves his father, must "Revenge his foul and most unnatural murther"; his promise to sweep into action is "apt," the Ghost remarks, but not worthy of special notice:

\[
duller shouldst thou be than the fat weed
That rots itself in ease on Lethe wharf,
Wouldst thou not stir in this.
\]

(32-34)

The crucial thing is that Hamlet remember, that he honor his father's cause by keeping it alive. If he does, all else will follow: the state will be cleansed, the Queen redeemed, and the Ghost appropriately avenged. Having delivered his message, the Ghost remains on hand long enough to be sure that Hamlet has the self-discipline to conceal what he has been told. When he and his friends have sworn to secrecy, the "perturbed spirit" (183) can rest, satisfied, apparently, by Hamlet's responsiveness and plan of attack.

When the Ghost does return (in the "closet" scene) it is because Hamlet's treatment of Gertrude suggests he has become too obsessed with his own concerns—specifically, with his anger at his mother and his unfounded suspicions about her role in his father's death. "Do not forget!" the Ghost says, reminding his son of his promise:

This visitation
Is but to whet thy almost blunted purpose.

(3.4.110-11)

The fallen Polonius is not mentioned, except by implication as (from the Ghost's viewpoint) a trivial irrelevancy, a digression from the task at hand. The rest of the speech—

\[
\text{But look, amazement on thy mother sits,}
\text{O, step between her and her fighting soul.}
\]
Conceit in weakest bodies strongest works,
Speak to her, Hamlet.
(112-15)

—reiterates the Ghost's original concern for Gertrude's spiritual health and shows his compassion for her after the bitter, grueling excoriation that she, struggling with her awakening conscience, has just endured from Hamlet.

Having intervened to point Hamlet in the direction appropriate to his purposes, and having seen some evidence of repentance in Gertrude (more extensive in Q1 than in Q2 and F), the Ghost vanishes from the play. His disappearance (and replacement by dry bones in a dusty graveyard) suggests to me that, his good work of redemption now accomplished and the necessary task of revenge again under way, he has been relieved of his purgatorial suffering. A good deal remains thereafter for Hamlet to do, but responsibility for defining what that is, carrying it out, and dealing with the consequences has fallen upon Hamlet alone.

**HAMLET'S PRIORITIES**

Hamlet is in many ways his father's son: he, too, holds himself to high standards and strongly values physical courage, moral integrity, self-restraint, patriotism, loyalty, and respect for women (until they betray him). But Hamlet and his father are also crucially different in character and personality. For one thing, Hamlet is psychologically incapable of sharing his father's magna-nimity toward Gertrude: her adultery seems to Hamlet as morally offensive as Claudius' fratricide. For another, while the Ghost's outrage is a product of his satisfaction with the probity of his life, his domestic virtues, the morality of his rule, and his glorious military achievements, Hamlet has no such confidence. At various points he characterizes himself as weak, morally flawed, and infirm of purpose; his mind is contaminated by feelings of impotence, self-doubt, and self-hatred; he is disillusioned, suspicious, and bitter in his dealings with others; and he is consumed by concerns we have no reason to suspect he has until he unexpectedly articulates them at some moment of tension.

There is, as well, the problem presented by Hamlet's age. The young man the Ghost is asking to take vengeance upon a reigning monarch is still at university, needs parental permission to travel abroad, and can be subjected to a public and humiliating scolding before the assembled court. These differences underlie many of the psychological tensions Hamlet experiences and explain his restless oscillations from one stance to another: embittered observer and malcontent, Machiavellian strategist, man of passion, stoic, bloody homicide, moral guide, rationalist, and, finally, fatalist.

The Hamlet we first encounter suffers the Ophelia-problem: he is a demoralized figure, alienated spiritually from the court of which he should be a central figure. When he reveals in soliloquy the deeper cause of his obvious sadness—his disappointment in his mother—his full position becomes clear: he is a victim without recourse to justice, powerless even to express his griefs:

> It is not, nor it cannot come to good,
> But break my heart, for I must hold my tongue.

(1.2.158-59)

Add to this his tendency to perceive his personal situation as a metaphysical condition, and we see that, bereft of hope for a better future, he is able to preserve his personal integrity only by centering himself in a reserved oppositional stance and expressing his indignation through bitterly equivocal banter with his mother and uncle.
The Ghost's revelations relieve Hamlet's despair by supplying him with a specific, energizing project on which to focus. They turn him into a new person: a young man with a sacred mission, for whom all things unrelated to revenge are "baser matter" (1.4.104). But even then Hamlet, for reasons he unfairly imputes to his weakness of character, cannot immediately act. While clear enough on his general aims, the Ghost gives his son no concrete advice about how to proceed, aside from leaving his mother to heaven and not tainting his mind in the course of taking revenge. Hamlet must deal with his difficult situation by making the most of whatever assets he has. No wonder so much of his energy goes into simply maintaining his psychic equilibrium.

Hamlet functions very much like his counterparts in the play's sources and analogues. The Amleth legend concerns a certain kind of avenger, a cunning riddler who uses the pretense of madness to distract his enemies. Maintaining an "antic disposition" (1.5.172), Hamlet keeps up his morale and at the same time conducts successful psychological warfare against the court: he causes the Queen to feel guilty about her "o'erhasty" marriage; he gets Polonius to blame himself for being overly suspicious of his intentions regarding Ophelia; he frustrates Rosencrantz and Guildenstern by exposing and mocking their efforts to deceive him; he causes Claudius to lose his composure in public. While all these are only partial revenges and fall short of the Ghost's call for decisive action, they manifest a capacity to unsettle his enemies that alleviates Hamlet's sense of impotence. Of course, in Shakespeare's treatment of the Amleth story the protagonist, afflicted by doubts, anxieties, and contradictory purposes, lives a tumultuous inner life. He is, notoriously, a searching analyst of his psychic condition and a severe critic of his performance; he is concerned with such broad questions as the relative culpability of all human agents, including himself.

Earlier I compared Hamlet's predicament to Ophelia's, noting that they are both afflicted by feelings of personal impotence. We may also contrast it to Laertes' moral impotence. Polonius' parting advice to his son is not merely a set of observations about youth in general, but a pointed and well-considered analysis of his character. As the play will reveal them in his manner of pursuing vengeance, Laertes' faults include talking too much and acting out "unproportioned" thoughts (1.3.60); being unselective in choosing friends and mentors; being quarrelsome, but not handling himself well when in a quarrel; making premature judgments; acting without personal integrity and, as a consequence, being false to others. In addition, the man he is avenging is, in our experience, less the "noble father" (4.7.25) he fondly recalls than the "intruding fool" (3.4.31) Hamlet calls him. (While that does not justify killing him, of course, it does suggest that blame for his death is not all Hamlet's.) As Hamlet's foil, Laertes helps point up the power of his intellect and the moral integrity, in the midst of his psychological turmoil, of his engagement with his task.

Unlike Laertes, as we see in his response to the Pyrrhus speech, Hamlet is concerned about his emotional adequacy for the job at hand. Since he has asked to hear a vivid description of the actions of a revenger who is "total gules," "roasted in wrath and fire," "o'er-sized with coagulate gore" (2.2.457, 461, 462), it seems at first that he is vicariously living out a bloody revenge. But in the end what most strikes him about the Pyrrhus speech is not, as we might expect, the revenger's behavior—he does not say, "I think I'll become, like Pyrrhus, a raging homicide"—but the actor's disproportionate portionate response to Hecuba's fictional grief. While it seems to Hamlet "monstrous" (551) that an actor could be physically transformed by the mere idea of grief, it seems even worse that someone with a cause as compelling as his could be as undemonstrative as he has been. Deciding (for the moment) that a lack of sufficient passion is at the heart of his problem, he picks at himself, applying standards that necessarily make him feel like a failure.

In the earlier revenge tradition, represented by The Spanish Tragedy and Titus Andronicus, the protagonists' worst moments of distress and misery occur while they wander in ignorance of their true situation. Once they identify their enemies, they get on with the job of revenge vigorously, efficiently, and wittily. Impotence drives them mad; revenge makes them sane. In the revenge revival, as represented by Hamlet and Antonio's Revenge, knowing the facts is not enough; the protagonists suffer internal conflicts that prolong their misery. Marston's Antonio is torn by the command of his father's ghost that he slaughter the innocent Julio; he is
devastated by the death of Mellida; Hamlet turns his anger against himself for being slow to take revenge.

But after an explosion of passion and self-denunciation, he comes to see that mere rant is equally unworthy of him. He understands that though he may not have acknowledged them, there were good reasons not, to rush to take revenge. He asks the actors to perform *The Murder of Gonzago* not only to resolve his doubts about the Ghost's veracity and the reliability of his own responses—doubts logical enough, in retrospect, but somewhat startling when they appear—but to establish motives he can call his own: "I'll have grounds"—grounds "more relative" (603, 604), more closely related to ascertainable facts and (even more to the point, I think) to Hamlet's own concerns.

Hamlet's sudden expression of uncertainty about the Ghost's veracity is sometimes characterized as irresolution, an excuse to delay doing his duty. I take it, rather, as an effort to keep himself on track and strengthen his footing. To the self-accusatory question Why have I not acted before this?, Hamlet replies with a serious variation of a Falstaffian idea: that he might have been a coward on instinct. As the lion will not harm a true prince, so a true prince would hesitate to follow the directions of a false ghost. In addition, putting on *The Murder of Gonzago* forwards his efforts to disconcert the court and gives him the chance to alleviate his isolation by sharing his problems and perceptions with Horatio.

The "To be or not to be" soliloquy advances the revenge theme by relating Hamlet's immediate situation to the general question of how to deal with sufferings and wrongs that cannot be ascribed to some particular, malicious enemy, but are caused by the general and intractable conditions of existence—outrageous fortune, seas of troubles, the passage of time, nameless oppressors, the prudish, false lovers, unresponsive officials of state, and unworthy persons in general. Should one face such evils stoically, or adopt a stance of active, if unfocused, heroism? Or is it better to escape into death, on the assumption that death is oblivion? Or, since it is impossible to know what follows death (never mind, for the moment, the Ghost), do you let your apprehensions paralyze you and merely endure life as best you can? Taking the soliloquy as a more or less free-floating general statement about the fundamental insolubility of the human dilemma—as it seems, by its Q2 and Fl placement, the author meant it to be—it appears that Hamlet is afflicted by endless and inconclusive speculations that consume themselves and bring him to a stalemate.

But his confrontation with Ophelia thrusts him back into the action. Hamlet is furious to discover he is being spied upon and, apparently, betrayed by one he trusted: like his father, he has been caught with his guard down, when alertness has been his main and most reliable defense. His list of enemies seems to have multiplied to include those he thought his friends, and his humiliation of Ophelia during the play scene is his petty revenge upon her for seeming too like his mother. Hamlet the avenger has tried to retreat—or advance?—to a consideration of general issues, but events have overtaken him. He has begun to accumulate his own list of grievances, in addition to the Ghost's.

That *The Murder of Gonzago* is designed more to confront Hamlet's concerns than his father's is clear from its contents (regardless of which lines Hamlet himself wrote). First, it does not stress the motives of the murderer, who appears only briefly, but the shallowness of the Player Queen, whom the Player King responsibly and sensitively prepares for his impending death by anticipating with approval that she, who will "live in this fair world behind, / Honor'd, belov'd," might go on to remarry "one as kind" as himself (3.2.175-77). It is the Player Queen who characterizes remarriage as "treason," declaring,

In second husband let me be accurs'd!
None wed the second but who kill'd the first.

(179-80)

Through these lines, Hamlet avenges himself on the Queen for the hasty remarriage that mocked her florid displays of grief over King Hamlet's death.
Earlier in the play, the audience was reminded of the extent to which humans are subject to chance: Hamlet, in act 1, scene 3, remarked on the ways our reputations may be completely corrupted by the possession of a single flaw, for which we might not even be responsible. Similarly, in act 3, scene 2, the Player King speaks of the unreliability of human purpose, which is subject to memory and passion, and of the fickleness of worldly opinion, which follows only the fortunate. He concludes with a lesson many people in the play, Hamlet included, will come to learn:

Our wills and fates do so contrary run
That our devices still are overthrown,
Our thoughts are ours, their none of our own.

(211-13)

To the insight that human activities are subject to external chance, the Player King adds the observation that we are also subject to the instability of our mental processes: we are weak or forgetful. "What we do determine, oft we break," for the reason that "purpose is but the slave to memory, / Of violent birth, but poor validity" (187-89). These are the tragic conditions under which Hamlet must pursue his revenge, subject to vagaries of existence that thwart his plans and momentarily undercut his faith in the fundamental justice of the universe.

Though earlier distressed at his own lack of emotion, Hamlet, in the moments before the playing of The Murder of Gonzago, becomes more concerned about the danger of excess passion. He recommends that the actors perform with a "temperance" (7) that will forward the purposes of their art. More particularly, Hamlet praises Horatio for his equanimity, for being one of those

Whose blood and judgment are so well co-meddled,
That they are not a pipe for Fortune's finger
To sound what stop she please.

(69-71)

Especially at this moment, Hamlet requires the example of a man who is not "passion's slave" (72): in keeping with the Ghost's injunction that he not "taint" his mind while taking revenge, he is, wisely, concerned about his mental state, especially since he feels capable of performing prodigies of violence—"such bitter business as the day / Would quake to look on" (391-92). Hamlet's main goal at the end of this scene is to convert his mother by forceful, even "cruel" rebukes; his main fear is that his passion will spill over into violence, that "the soul of Nero" will enter his "firm bosom," that he will become "unnatural" (395-96).

In act 3, scene 2, Hamlet has an unexpected opportunity to kill the King, but on terms he finds unacceptable. He is offended at the thought that Claudius' soul might be saved while his father still suffers for his sins. This moment had been foreshadowed earlier in the play by the revelation in Hamlet of a sometimes exquisite sensitivity to questions of fairness. To Horatio, he had spoken of meeting his "dearest foe in heaven" (1.2.182) as the circumstance he would find most un-bearable. Because he would not subject his father to that indignity—of seeing his dearest foe in heaven, before him—Hamlet passes up his first clear chance to kill Claudius. His feelings in this regard are psychologically understandable, but succeeding events suggest that Shakespeare wants to convey a sense that they are morally tainted. If heaven is "ordinant" in this, Hamlet's precipitous, impulsive, and ultimately self-destructive killing of Polonius—the discharge of the pent-up feelings he left unacted—may be punishment for his nasty wish.

In the closet scene, Hamlet brings up the issues that have most troubled him. Some of these are the same ones mentioned by his father: Gertrude appears to have no standards; her judgment is corrupt; she does not act her age; she is shameless. But coming from Hamlet, these accusations seem wild and unbecoming. In addition,
and quite unexpected—one of those concerns we were unaware he had—is Hamlet's suspicion that Gertrude had been Claudius' accomplice in murder. The accusation amazes Gertrude and adds so much to the heat of Hamlet's assault that the Ghost intervenes to protect her. But, as Peter Mercer points out, Hamlet's very excesses seem to act as an emotional purge:

> Whatever our discomfort with the ferocity of Hamlet's attack on his mother … that encounter seems actually to have liberated him from the burden of disgust and outrage that has weighed him down since the beginning of the play.²

Having gotten this accusation out of his system—and then having it convincingly refuted not only by Gertrude's amazed denial but by the Ghost's implicit repudiation of the charge—he feels freer to concentrate on the "sport" of his coming confrontation with Claudius.

Hamlet's state of mind is relatively clear at this point. He understands that the death of Polonius will have dire consequences, but he is not oppressed or diverted from his goals on that account. In no doubt of Claudius' guilt, he insults him fairly freely. Their war is still somewhat covert—each for his own reason retains the fiction of Hamlet's madness—but each is aware of the other's motives and feelings.

In the Q2 soliloquy "How all occasions," Hamlet again assesses himself and again comes to fresh conclusions about himself. The Ghost had cited memory as a sacred function, capable of motivating noble actions; in "O what a rogue," Hamlet had thought of the ability to feel passion as a great test of character; to Horatio, he had praised the virtue of self-control. In this soliloquy, he elevates reason to the head of the list of noble motives. It is because our Creator has given us "god-like reason" that we must be revengers; that is what separates us from the beasts who only "sleep and feed" (4.4.35), who live in "oblivion" (38). To do otherwise is a perversion of reason, which can too easily be the disguise of that "craven scruple / Of thinking too precisely on th' event" that contains "but one part wisdom / And ever three parts coward" (40-43).

And yet within a few lines he concludes, against reason, that one should above all be ruled by considerations of honor, that the proper stance for one with a cause like himself—one who has had "a father kill'd, a mother stain'd, / Excitements of my reason and my blood" (57-58)—is to have nothing but "bloody" (66) thoughts. And this at the very moment that he is leaving Denmark, under guard and at the King's bidding, for an indeterminate amount of time. At moments like this, Hamlet's restless mind provides him no stable point from which to act or even to evaluate his actions; it leaves him more than ever prey to impulse and chance. For all his brave words and noble intentions, he has, on a human level, made a botch of things: the King lives, Polonius is dead, Ophelia will go mad, and Laertes will become his deadly enemy. We may not hold him guilty, and we may feel that he was never given a satisfactory chance to discharge the full range of his responsibilities; however, it remains true that no position he has adopted, in his unaided quest for revenge, has yielded the desired result. What happens thereafter, I would like to argue, reflects a sort of Euripidean manipulation.

**HAMLET'S RESIGNATION**

I have rather lightly exonerated Hamlet from deeds for which others have severely taken him to task. Account me one of the "general gender,"

> Who, dipping all his faults in their affection,  
Work like the spring that turneth wood to stone,  
Convert his gyves to graces.  
(4.7.18-21)
Those "gyves"—for which read, in the context of the play, his trials and constraints, his dilemmas and errors—are the means by which Shakespeare invites his audience to identify with his articulate and attractive protagonist. It is Claudius, after all, who sneers at the inconvenient love the populace has for the only man capable of unasking his crimes.

Shakespeare is not alone in adopting such an attitude toward a compromised tragic hero. J. W. Lever has pointed out that rather than follow the Aristotelian model, in which characters with fatal flaws are brought down "by the decree of just if inscrutable powers," some Jacobean playwrights, reflecting the philosophic turmoil of a time in which the consolidation of state power was being challenged by subversions old and new, adopted the view that whatever faults of deficiency or excess their heroes exhibited, "the fundamental flaw is not in them but in the world they inhabit." Therefore, Lever argues, "in Jacobean tragedy it is not primarily the conduct of the individual, but of the society which assails him, that stands condemned." As I noted earlier, I believe this view of things (chronology aside) largely exonerates Titus for his excesses; it also reaches to Hamlet, who fits Lever's description of a hero "faced with iniquity on high, with crimes committed by a tyranny immune to criticism or protest," who is confronted "with the imperative necessity to act, even at the price of his own moral contamination" (12-13).

To constitute the audience as a forgiving community willing to identify with the cause of a protagonist who has not only risked but also suffered contamination in the pursuit of righteous goals, the playwright lifts from him the burden of initiating action on behalf of justice. A centered Hamlet, satisfied that though he has not always done the right thing he has always pursued a just cause, is allowed to transcend contamination by resigning himself to death and waiting for evil to undo itself.

On his return from his aborted trip to England, it is clear that Hamlet is seeking the long view with regard to all questions, including revenge. More particularly, we see that his rage is now focused on Claudius, and that he has acquired new and strong reasons of his own for wanting revenge on the King. Hamlet brings to his final encounters a balance of engagement and detachment that issues from his at last coming to feel himself properly grounded with respect to providence, his relations to others, and himself. To be sure, he can still be surprised, enraged, saddened—as his struggle with Laertes at Ophelia's gravesite demonstrates—but he is secure in the thought that he is on the right track at last. Great spiritual changes seem to have taken place in Hamlet, as though he had literally been away for the several years Amleth spent in England. Indeed, the Gravedigger speaks of both Hamlet and his father in the past tense, as figures of history. In the interim, Hamlet has come to see most human activity—the quibbling of lawyers, the trading of land, the climbing of social ladders—as petty and mean, ending in the dust of the graveyard. It is hard to maintain much overt passion for revenge when viewing life from such a philosophic distance.

But again Hamlet is not permitted to stay disengaged for long. Ophelia's "maimed" (5.1.219) funeral rites and Laertes' flamboyant mourning gestures elicit a passionate response from him and lead to a conflict between the two young men that plays directly into Claudius' hands. Hamlet's assault on Laertes is based on a mental lapse, as he admits later: he should have appreciated the similarities in their situations. He cannot, however, because he is offended by what he had earlier admired: the capacity to express passion, which, coming from Laertes, seems now melodramatic rant and emotionalism. But Hamlet's parting words, after the scuffle in the grave, exhibit his continuing, if grim, obsession with justice. Whatever happens, people will eventually express their true natures and be rewarded appropriately: "The cat will mew, and dog will have his day" (292).

This expression of faith in some sort of providence or moral inevitability is not new to Hamlet's consciousness: he has asserted the belief that

Foul deeds will rise,
Though all the earth o'erwhelm them, to
men's eyes.
He has acknowledged the limitations placed upon us by divine law, the "canon 'gainst self-slaughter" (132). But he has more often spoken of existence as chaotic, subject not only to human will but also to mere chance. He knows that men may suffer unjustly because of their birth, "wherein they are not guilty / (Since nature cannot choose his origin)" (1.4.25-26); he speaks of the meaningless depredations humans suffer at the hands of "outrageous fortune" (3.1.58); he praised Horatio's indifference to "Fortune's buffets and rewards" (3.1.58), which are unrelated to merit.

Therefore, Hamlet's expression of wholehearted faith in providence does strike a fresh note, as he excitedly tells Horatio the details of his adventures at sea:

Our indiscretion sometime serves us well
When our deep plots do pall, and that should learn us
There's a divinity that shapes our ends,
Rough-hew them how we will.

(5.2.8-10)

His impulsive decision to pick the pockets of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern uncovers the King's plot against him; his youthful training in writing "fair" (34), which he had resented and "labor'd much / How to forget" (34-35), provides the skill to forge a letter to the English king; his possession of his father's seal helps make the forgery seem authentic. These events heighten Hamlet's sense of himself as a man on a special and sacred mission who need not be conscience-stricken by the deaths of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern (and, by implication, Polonius). He dismisses them all with the thought that

Their defeat
Does by their own insinuation grow.
'Tis dangerous when the baser nature comes
Between the pass and fell incensed points
Of mighty opposites.

(58-62)

They are not on his conscience because they involved themselves in matters beyond their comprehension—a harsh doctrine, but no harsher than the Calvinist determinism so powerfully shaping Protestant thought at the time, and consistent with Hamlet's now secure sense of mission.

There is great assurance and firmness in Hamlet's final summary analysis of his reasons for revenge:

Does it not, think thee, stand me now upon—
He that hath kill'd my king and whor'd my mother,
Popp'd in between th' election and my hopes,
Thrown out his angle for my proper life,
And with such coz'nage—is't not perfect conscience
To quit him with this arm? And is't not to be damn'd,
To let this canker of our nature come
In further evil?

(63-70)
Again, Hamlet startles us with a new motive: that Claudius cheated him of the crown that was rightfully his. But he also expresses a new justification for revenge. Since Claudius represents the fundamental flaws of human nature, original sin itself, hating him is a moral obligation; by rooting him out, we cure ourselves of a deadly ill. This conclusion further clears Hamlet's conscience and removes more barriers to action.

But it also removes incentives to action. Why plan deeply when providence is at work, and clearly on your side? One need only watch one's chance and accept what providence brings. Earlier, he had, though repenting his killing of Polonius, accepted it as somehow an act ordained:

heaven hath pleas'd it so
To punish me with this, and this with me,
That I must be their scourge and minister.

(3.4.173-75)

And now Hamlet elects to ignore his own forebodings and "defy augury" with the thought that "There is a special providence in the fall of a sparrow" (5.2.219-20). Providence delivers Claudius into his hands, as James Calderwood points out, for a double killing and a dual revenge. Hamlet's first killing of Claudius, by swordtip, is "not for his father but for himself, not in response to the Ghost's command but in direct retaliation for the attack on his own life." But there is a second killing of Claudius: forcing the poisoned wine down his throat after the quite sufficient act of stabbing him. "Hamlet stabs Claudius for himself, but poisons him for his father."4

His revenge accomplished, at peace with himself at the point of death, Hamlet is concerned that the truth be known. In a gentler version of his father's request—to remember him—Hamlet assigns his friend the task of telling his story and ensuring that his private sense of accomplishment at having maintained his integrity and fulfilled his moral duty will be conveyed to the world at large and woven into the fabric of a renewed state. A psychological account of Hamlet would focus on his final mood, especially his ability to be at peace with himself: to be "centered" and feel, in Plato's sense, the inner harmony of the just man. Shakespeare's culture offered him the concept of providence as a means of expressing that settled state of mind, but it is equally well described, I think, in terms of Hamlet's acceptance of himself as a mortal being doing his best under terrible conditions.

That Hamlet will die at the end of the play is as much a matter of dramatic convention as of anything in the play's internal dynamics or the psychology of the characters: the killing of Polonius and the death of Ophelia are events that arouse audience expectations of his death. What is in the playwright's hands is how his revenger will meet that fate. Having inflicted upon Hamlet a full range of emotional and moral distress, the psychological burden of impotence in the face of evil, ironies of fate and treacheries of fortune, Shakespeare in the end confers upon him a sanctified, redemptive death that proclaims him a definitive—and multifaceted—hero. He has upheld his own values: the aggrieved youth Laertes, who has also stumbled seeking revenge, forgives him for the death of Polonius; the philosopher Horatio says he died deserving a singing escort to heaven; and he has upheld his father's values as well: his successor Fortinbras grants him the burial rites of a soldier and a king.

And yet we would be right, I think, to see the very invoking of providence as testimony to the power of the revenge theme to open unresolvable questions of justice and order, questions that we, like Hamlet, might have liked the chance to consider. The playwright has provided an emotionally satisfying closure, but it is in a different mode than the play that precedes it [King Lear], and it has taken an act of God to provide it. …

Notes

1 Maurice Charney, Hamlet's Fictions (New York: Routledge, 1988), 123.

3 J. W. Lever, *The Tragedy of State* (London: Methuen, 1971), 10, 12. Lever goes on to say, usefully, that with regard to characters in Renaissance drama, "What really matters is the quality of their response to intolerable situations. This is a drama of adversity and stance, not of character and destiny."

4 James L. Calderwood, *To Be and Not to Be: Negation and Metadrama in "Hamlet"* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), 46. Another account of the relationship between Hamlet and his father is provided by David Scott Kastan, for whom Hamlet's delay reflects his unwillingness to become like either the father who urges revenge or the uncle on whom it would be visited: "Only when he can persuade himself that revenge is a mode of restoration rather than reprisal can Hamlet move toward its execution, but always he is reminded of the inescapable relatedness of victim/villain/avenger" ("'His Seminal Is His Mirror': Hamlet and the Imitation of Revenge," *Shakespeare Studies* 19 [1987]; 113).

**Hamlet (Vol. 35): Characterization**

**Bernard Grebanier (essay date 1960)**


*[In the excerpt below, Grebanier analyzes the natures of Hamlet, Claudius, Gertrude, Ophelia, Polonius, Laertes, Horatio, Rosencrantz, and Guildenstern.]*

**PRINCE HAMLET**

We have a rough idea of the hero's tragic flaw. Through a consideration of the plot and action we know what he is not, and more than a little of what he is. If we refuse to wander afield from the play, it shall not be difficult to describe Hamlet as Shakespeare created him.

We already know, for instance, that so far from being a shrinking violet or a creature of meditation who acts only in his imagination, he is an extraordinarily active man, a man who finds it easy to act—as witness: his following the Ghost despite his friends' admonitions, his immediately conceiving the plan for the Mousetrap on the first possible occasion, his effective presentation of it, his killing of Polonius, his unsealing the King's commission to England and substituting of other orders, his boarding the pirate ship alone, his winning over the pirates to his bidding, his grappling with Laertes in the grave, his eager acceptance of the challenge to fence, his violent attack on Laertes once he knows he has been tricked, his savage killing of Claudius. We also know that he is thought of not only as a scholar and courtier but as a soldier too, and that it is as a soldier that Fortinbras thinks of him.

Hamlet is thirty years of age. This fact, despite wrangling of scholars over it, is settled by a passage in the play; since it is the only reference to the matter in the entire work, Shakespeare's own words must be considered final and authoritative, and there can be no appeal from them. In the last act the gravedigger informs Hamlet that he took up his profession "on the very day that young Hamlet was born" (V, i, 160); a few lines further on, he adds that he has been working at it "man and boy, thirty years" (177). This poses an even simpler problem in arithmetic than the one we have already so triumphantly solved. (Why so many scholars, no youngsters themselves, are dismayed that Hamlet, who is young, can be thirty, is no less astonishing than shudder-causing to consider. As for Hamlet's being a student at the university, as he and Horatio have been when the play opens, there is nothing strange in that. Until fairly recently universities were not trade schools but institutions of learning. Scholars attended them not to acquire the means of earning a
livelihood, nor even to become better citizens, but only to learn. Learning was then an end in itself—a concept
now deemed medieval in educational circles (educational authorities do travel in circles)—and the immediate
objective was the enrichment of the knowledge of the individual. Even today, of course, one finds many a
grey-head among the student population of universities.)

What does Hamlet look like? Certainly he is a man of energetic figure, not at all the wispy creature we so
often see upon the boards. It is too ridiculous that when he speaks of his "too too solid flesh" (I, ii, 129) the
actor should have barely enough to keep him warm—that when the Queen fears he will lose the match with
Laertes because "he's fat, and scant of breath," the Hamlet before us should look like the ghost of a ghost,
whom a puff of wind could blow away. Not that we suggest that either of these lines proves the Prince to be
corpulent—that would be absurd for a young tragic hero, equally absurd for a man we are to think of as a
soldier, an expert fencer, the glass of fashion and the mold of form. A hero of normally athletic frame venting
his disgust with the human race in a fit of revulsion against his mother's remarriage might well deem any flesh
too solid; and a fencer out of practice and even a trifle heavier than he has been might be too fat and short of
breath for the alertness required in the match. Nothing more is conveyed by the two passages.

Aside from the testimony of Hamlet's activities, we have another clue to his physique—a clue that in itself
would not be decisive, but which may be considered proof of the justice of what has been said. Shakespeare,
writing for his own troupe, knew in advance which actors would assume the various roles he was creating. He
knew, while he was composing Hamlet, that Burbage, the great actor who impersonated many of
Shakespeare's heroes, would enact the title role. It would be almost unavoidable that the dramatist should, as
he evolved the character of Hamlet, have conceived him in the figure of Burbage. And from Burbage's portrait
we know him to have been a man of powerful frame. And while in life we would grant, on intimate
acquaintance with the person, that a man of powerful physique could actually be timid, or too sensitive, or too
thoughtful, or too scrupulous, or complex-ridden, on the stage such qualities can best be communicated by a
man delicate—even effeminate-looking—such a Hamlet as unfortunately we usually see. The audience
looking at an energetic, muscular figure on the boards will naturally expect him to exhibit energetic, muscular
qualities. And these Hamlet possesses.

To reject the idea of a too sensitive, too thoughtful, too scrupulous Hamlet, however, is not to deny him his
extraordinary brilliance of intellect. It is a by-product of the specialization which has narrowed every phase of
modern life that we take for granted that the hero of the football field avoids the library as he would a leper
colony, and that the lover of books will never be found in the stadium. And, indeed, such is by and large our
experience. But it was not always so. The Renaissance gentleman held quite as much as the ancients the
doctrine of a sound mind in a sound body. His newly recaptured enthusiasm for the riches of human
experience, after the long centuries during which only the life after death had been thought worthy of
attention, prompted him to encompass as much of it as he could, and to exercise his faculties to their fullest.
The depth and the breadth of Hamlet's character make him, far from the melancholic or the neurotic, almost
the most magnificent embodiment in literature of the Renaissance ideal. Where shall be found a more splendid
expression of this ideal than his rapturous phrasing of it:

What a piece of work is a man! How noble in reason! How infinite in faculty! In form and
moving how express and admirable! In action how like an angel! In apprehension how like a
god! The beauty of the world! The paragon of animals!

II, ii, 316 seq.,

where a completer tribute to the endless potentialities of man to make this life abundant and beautiful? It is the
more significant of Hamlet's make-up that he delivers this apostrophe, from the deepest founts of his nature
almost in despite of himself, at a moment of great bitterness; and if he adds:
And yet, to me, what is this quintessence of dust? Man delights not me,
it is because he has just become convinced that two of his oldest friends have treacherously sold themselves to Claudius' employ.

When we insist that Hamlet is an athletic man of strong body, therefore, we no way imply that his frame is any more powerful than the intellect it houses. Hamlet, indeed, is probably the most admirably intellectual of the world's tragic heroes. His interests are everywhere; he is at home in the world of books, of sports, of music, of speculation, and on the battlefield, to mention only a few spheres of his knowledge. [This universality is the only respect in which it is safe to say he mirrors his author. Among the endless facets of Shakespeare's genius, the limitlessness of his zest for knowing everything about life is one of the most compelling. It is everywhere stamped upon his very vocabulary….] This universality is reflected in his uncommon respect and enthusiasm for words. He uses them with the genius and heady delight of a great poet. Whereas for Polonius words are traps in which he is always getting snared, impediments over which he is forever stumbling, for Hamlet they are important realities. He holds them up to the light to glory in their form and color. For him they are more than the vestment for ideas, they are also inspiring sources for new ideas. Language, in the wretched circumstances in which he finds himself, is as much comfort to him as music can be to the musician. And that is why, with no one but Horatio to talk to, he pours out the torrent of his soliloquies—in a flood and power such as Shakespeare has allowed no other of his tragic heroes.

It is this brilliance of his intellect which is responsible for much of the confusion of the commentaries. His mind works with lightning rapidity and hurries on from idea to idea. No one about him is anywhere near being his equal, and Horatio is the only one who always understands what he is talking about. Hamlet always speaks to the point, always talks sense—though expressing it too dazzlingly for his hearers' comprehension. Feeling himself surrounded only by enemies and those in the hire of his enemies, save for one friend and a few honest soldiers, he is too contemptuous of his foes, too indifferent of their opinion, to be plain and homely in his drift, too enamored of words to resist toying with them. It is thoroughly characteristic of him that he is forever using them with double meanings—one for himself, one for his interlocutor; he is not only unconcerned that he speaks beyond the comprehension of the court, he is in this way able to ease his inner torment by venting his scorn of a parcel of time-servers. The others, not following his meanings, find it all the more convenient to explain away their slowness of wit by deeming him mad. But it is surely inexcusable that the scholars, instead of deciphering what he says, should, like Polonius, interpret his flashing brilliance as madness, real or feigned. Hamlet is witty, ironic, sardonic throughout the play—even, at times, because of his speed, cryptic—but he never says anything that for all its brilliance is not perfectly rational and thoroughly logical and appropriate to the moment he says it. One needs the greatest alertness to keep up with him, it is true. But that fact renders him not abnormal, only superior to the normal. [One is aware, of course, that being superior to the norm would render him thoroughly abnormal in the view of some psychologists.]

We have said that he is certainly not a professional philosopher, who discourses for the pleasure of it on abstract concepts—nothing could be more disastrous in drama than such a character given free rein!—but he is a highly philosophical man. That is to say that, like Portia, who in this respect is his counterpart and to a degree shares his basic philosophy, he never starts a train of speculation for its own sake, but rather, like her, is stimulated to speculation by events and experiences. Returning to her home after the trial, Portia observes a light in her house, remarks upon it, and follows it with a philosophical reflection, since that is her turn of mind:

That light we see is burning in my hall.
How far that little candle throws his beams!
So shines a good deed in a naughty world.

V, i, 89 seq.
Thus, too, works Hamlet's mind—but with a difference. Because he is a man of powerful energies, a man
indeed of violence when aroused, he does not pause to make the observation of the event, but begins with the
speculation which the event arouses. You will find embedded in the turmoil of his soliloquies the occasion
which causes the violence, but it is always the conclusion which comes first. Thus, in his first soliloquy, he
opens with:

    O, that this too too solid flesh would melt,
    Thaw, and resolve itself into a dew!

and goes on to express his disgust with the world:

    How weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable,
    Seems to me all the uses of this world,

and only after that comes the event which occasions this revulsion: his mother's callously marrying so soon
after his father's death:

    That it should come to this!
    But two months dead!
    I, ii, 129 seq.

[One is aware, of course, that being superior to the norm would render him thoroughly abnormal in the view
of some psychologists.]

This is the pattern of every one of his soliloquies: first the idea, then the occasion for it. And he soliloquizes in
this fashion because his is a volcanic nature, and because in his case the soliloquy is the release for his pent-up
feelings. What is important to remember is that, as a philosophic man rather than a philosopher, he is always
spurred to powerful reflection by a happening. If we wish to understand him and the play, we must, since this
is drama, interpret his soliloquies not literally but in terms of the situations which occasion them.

Since his express conduct is the fundamental part of the tragedy, it is a gross superficiality to follow the lead
of the commentators in looking for Hamlet's own philosophy of life in the bitter outpourings of his soliloquies.
Their dramatic function is to show us his inner ferment. But a man who loves life very much might be the first
to say, "I'm sick of it. I wish I were dead," when suddenly someone very close and dear to him behaves in a
way that makes all he thought of that individual an empty illusion. To know how Hamlet feels about life we
must watch not what he says about it so much as what he does living it. Look at him in this way, and you will
find him not melancholy, not complex-ridden, not pessimistic, not even disillusioned basically—but a healthy,
vigorous man, much in love with life, who, given the slightest opportunity, is happy, cheerful, companionable,
and kind.

It is not in his many bitter reflections that we are to look for his fundamental view of life, for those are always
inspired by the disenchanting conduct of those closest to him, but rather in speeches such as his beautiful
apostrophe to the nature of man. If we are to judge him under the circumstances when occasion allows him to
react normally, according to the inclinations of his own temperament—that is, when he is dealing with people
who give him no cause to distrust them, we shall find him remarkably high-minded and generous. Of all his
utterances there is perhaps one that gives us the clearest index to how Hamlet would live, given decent
surroundings: when he asks Polonius to see that the actors are "well bestowed" and "well used" (conceiving
shrewdly that Polonius may be counted upon to treat them shabbily, as his inferiors), the old man responds:

    My lord, I will use them according to their desert,
and Hamlet retorts angrily:

    God's bodykins, man, better. Use every man after his desert, and who should scape whipping?
    Use them after your own honour and dignity. The less they deserve, the more merit is in your
    bounty.

II, ii, 546 seq.

This is akin to the principles by which Portia lives; as she phrases them:

    Though justice be thy plea, consider this,
    That in the course of justice none of us
    Should see salvation. We do pray for mercy,
    And that same prayer doth teach us all to
    render
    The deeds of mercy.
    IV, i, 198 seq.

But Portia is surrounded by men and women of goodness and kindness, and she is free to allow her philosophy to blossom in all she says and does. Hamlet, encircled by knaves, can be himself only with comparatively few.

He not only takes unconcealed delight in the company of any human being he has no reason to distrust—and no pessimist or disillusioned optimist would do this—but also puts such people at their ease with ready grace, never stands on ceremony with them, never behaves like the self-conscious prince addressing the commoner, is indeed remarkably democratic in his dealings with them. These traits are exhibited at once on his first encounter with Horatio:

    HAM. Horatio!—or I do forget myself.
    HOR. The same, my lord, and your poor
    servant ever.
    HAM. Sir, my good friend. I'll change that
    name with you [i.e., servant].
    I, ii, 161 seq.

Then he turns to Marcellus to say:

    I am very glad to see you.
    I, ii, 167

When, at the conclusion of the scene, Horatio, Marcellus, and Bernardo leave, it is with the formal "Our duty to your honour." But Hamlet, indebted to them for their act of friendship, corrects them:

    Your love, as mine to you.
    I, ii, 254

His is the rare grace of the truly patrician mind which knows how to put others on the footing of equality without condescension. There are many such touches throughout the play. After his interview with the Ghost, when he has sworn Horatio and Marcellus to secrecy, they stand aside for him to precede them out; first he thanks them for their help with great sincerity:
With all my love I do commend me to you.
And what so poor a man as Hamlet is
May do, to express his love and friending to
you,
God willing shall not lack.

and then refuses to allow them to attend him as inferiors:

Let us go in together.

I, v, 184 seq.

Again, when Rosencrantz and Guildenstern first appear, his great pleasure at seeing them is openly expressed:

My excellent good friends! How dost thou, Guildenstern? Oh Rosencrantz! Good lads, how
do ye both?

II, ii, 228 seq.

His great capacity for enjoyment is manifested at their first mention of the Players; he is full of excited
enthusiasm:

He that plays the king shall be welcome ...

and he plies his schoolfellows with questions about them:

What players are they? …
How chances it they travel? …
Do they hold the same estimation they
did … ?

II, ii, 332 seq.

And when the actors arrive his cordiality and joy are unfeigned:

You're welcome, masters, welcome all. I am glad to see thee well. Welcome, good friends. O, my old friend! Thy face is valanced since I saw thee last; com'st thou to beard me in
Denmark? What, my young lady and mistress! By'r lady, your ladyship is nearer heaven than
when I saw you last …

II, ii, 440 seq.

Hamlet has serious shortcomings, yet no hero has more endearing traits. Though, in his first fit of anger
against Laertes' extravagant display of grief at Ophelia's grave, he fails to remember that the young man has
cause enough to resent him, when calm reflection reminds him of the facts Hamlet has the dignity and courage
to admit his fault to Horatio (V, ii, 75 seq.), and soon makes public apology to Laertes before the entire Court:

Give me your pardon, sir. I've done you
wrong,
But pardon't, as you are a gentleman.

V, ii, 237-38
Our respect for his integrity is the greater because he makes this beautiful amends to a man who is prepared to kill him by treachery.

His capacity for affection is profound and untainted by the bitterness of his circumstances. His open cordiality to Marcellus, Bernardo, and the actors proves how quickly he warms to those who deal honorably with him. It is the conduct of Rosencrantz, Guildenstern, and Ophelia which drives him to suspect them. With her he is most loath to be suspicious, indeed, and for all her stupidity and his harsh words his love for her never alters. It is no bar to the love he bears her and his desire to marry her that she is a commoner. The commonplace Polonius and Laertes, who in Hamlet's place would never be so indifferent to disparity of rank, can only think that Hamlet's purposes must be dishonorable. But social differences are of no consequence to the Prince, when he loves.

His friendship with Horatio, his one solace, is one of the great beauties of the play—not to be missed because it is understated. As is common with men, the two need few words to express it, and Hamlet only once feels the urge to put it into words (III, ii, 59 seq.), and then most eloquently. A look, a phrase, suffices for communicating the complete understanding between them; nor does Horatio hesitate gently to inform his friend when he believes him in the wrong. Though quiet, it is one of the great friendships of literature, and is itself a demonstration of Hamlet's capacities for the richest of lives.

[It is a matter for serious consideration whether the institution of friendship, the noblest of human relationships, is not now on its way out, its demise under Freudian auspices. As The New Yorker put it some years ago, things are getting so bad that two men no longer dare to go away together for a weekend without taking along a woman. In these naughty times, it already takes considerable courage to maintain the relationship. For some curious reason, anyone may hate any member of the same sex without incurring the suspicion of abnormality; it is pathological only to feel affection. Hamlet and Horatio must inevitably fall under the axe, when psychoanalysis gets around to them!]

If Hamlet, therefore, pours out bitter words it is not because his nature is warped. On the contrary, his bitterness is only the expression of the frustration of his powers for delight, good health, activity, and affection—of his having to check, because of the situation he is in and the corruptibility of those he has loved best, his deepest impulses to love and to lead a full, wholesome life. It is the bitterness of the dynamic personality straining at the bonds imposed upon it, of the affectionate nature that must withhold its warmth, and instead of loving must distrust.

In terms of his situation how are we then to describe his tragic flaw, the hamartia which will hurl him to destruction? We have already identified it as a species of rashness, and thus placed him in the company of the classic tragic heroes of world literature—Clytemnestra, Oedipus, Electra, Creon, Phèdre, Mrs. Alving, Lady Dedlock, Brutus, Othello, Macbeth, Lear, Cleopatra, Jude the Obscure, Eustacia, Emma Bovary, and the Lost Lady—all great souls who fall through heedlessness, each in his own way. [To estimate how distant we are from the commentaries, let us quickly review critical opinion on Hamlet's tragic flaw. Stoll says he has none; he "has no tragic fault …—like Romeo's his fault is not in himself but in his stars." Walley agrees: "He is a good man overthrown by evil through no particular fault of his own." Spurgeon implies the same: the problem of the tragedy "is not the problem of an individual at all"; Fergusson adopts this view. (None of these explains how, lacking a hero with a tragic flaw, Hamlet qualifies as tragedy.) We have noted that Hamlet's tragic failing according to Goethe is extreme sensitivity; according to Coleridge and Schlegel, excessive intellectualization; Bradley, melancholia; Ulrici, moral scrupulosity; the psychoanalysts, a complex. (Klein and Werder found the root of the tragedy outside the hero's character, in his environing circumstances.) One critic finds Hamlet lacking all passion for action; another, lacking all emotion. Another accuses him of desiring to be too perfect; a lady thinks the cause of his disaster his determination never to marry. Masefield finds him too wise to act, since in Hamlet's world action would be fruitless. Adams thinks "the young Prince possesses to a fatal extent idealism regarding human nature": his tragic fault is a "too easy faith
in human nature.”\textsuperscript{10} And Campbell believes that because Hamlet is inconsolable for his losses, "his grief is of the sort that renders him dull, that effaces memory, that makes him guilty of the sin of sloth."\textsuperscript{11}

By temperament nothing is easier for Hamlet than to act; his powerful nature propels him into action on the slightest challenge. But his problem is such as is hardest for a man so constituted: to wait, to be patient until he can prove that the Ghost spoke the truth, and, having settled that, to build his case against Claudius so that vengeance will be plainly an act of justice before the world. His own strong-mindedness makes him fully aware of the course he must choose, and he exhibits a degree of self-control remarkable for a man of his volcanic impulses. So far from being the hero who cannot whip himself into action, he is the tragic figure that \textit{can} act readily, but \textit{who must not}—until the moment be ripe. It is heartbreaking to witness the extent to which his mind \textit{does} triumph over his energetic nature, the extent to which he \textit{does} hold the impulse to act in leash; his self-control is truly heroic. But great as it is, it is not enough. Precisely when he is beginning to reap the harvest of his hard-won patience, he forfeits everything by his unconsidered killing of the man behind the arras, Polonius—as it turns out. This act of sheer impulse has negated the value of all he has suffered and accomplished, and, moreover, has tendered his fate into the hands of his enemy.

Hamlet is well aware of his tragic rashness of temperament. His admiration for Horatio is based upon his friend's better balanced nature:

\begin{verbatim}
for thou hast been
As one, in suffering all, that suffers nothing,
A man that Fortune's buffets and rewards
Hath ta'en with equal thanks; and blest are those
Whose blood and judgment are so well commingled
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 …
\end{verbatim}

III, ii, 70 seq.

How different from himself, whose blood is ever at war with his judgment! Nor does Hamlet need any other to apprize him of the fatality of his rash murder of the old man; he sees it at once—when the deed is irremediable. And, as he is being hurried off to England, he puts the blame where it is due—his failure to use his head when it was most important to do so:

\begin{verbatim}
Sure, He that made us with such large discourse [i.e., power of reasoning],
Looking before and after, gave us not
That capability and god-like reason
To fust in us unused.
\end{verbatim}

IV, iv, 36 seq.

Yes, it was his duty to look before and after, and in truth he did so astonishingly well for such a man. But in his situation, any loss of reason, any impulsive act invites destruction.

Well, fate is kinder than he has title to expect. An impulse causes him to go through the papers of Guildenstern and Rosencrantz, and there he discovers the palpable proof of Claudius' criminality that he
requires. In his account of the adventure to Horatio, completely forgetting that it was rashness which once ruined his cause and might easily have brought about his own death, he hymns rashness because this time it resulted in a benefit:

Rashly,—
And praised be rashness for it; let us know
Our indiscretion sometimes serves us well
When our deep plots do pall …

V, ii, 6 seq.

His experience should have taught him otherwise. Once again the stars are auspicious; he has a second, even a better chance to carry out his task, despite his tragic error. But as he speaks we tremble for the issue: what can be hoped for a man who is glad to be rash? He is, as usual, too ready
to take arms against a sea of troubles.

And our fears are only too just. He accepts the offer to fence with Laertes. Rashly forgetting that Laertes has no reason to wish him well, and that the King, now his bitter enemy, who has already practised against his life, is the sponsor of the match, Hamlet omits inspecting the foils.

As we have said, no lover of the sport would inspect them. What tennis player examines the ball before it comes his way, to see that it is stuffed with hair, not with dynamite? Ah, but what tennis player accepts an invitation to the match from his deadliest foe? Or, if he did, would it not be wise of him to inspect the balls, unsportsmanlike though it be? Hamlet, in his excitement over the in-incriminating document in his possession, is heedless again, and forgets the resourcefulness of his adversary—this time, fatally. And so, though he presently executes his task, he does so at the needless cost of his life.

This rashness of his is, of course, allied to his best qualities—his strength, his courage, as made demonstrable on the many occasions when he leaps into action. It is allied, too, to his indifference to the esteem of the court, his willingness to let them think what they please of his sanity. It is a byproduct, as are his wit, irony, and toying with words, of his excessive good health, his strong animal spirits.

But, as in life our defects are usually the other side of our best qualities, it is also allied to his worst faults. Because of it, Hamlet, so gracious and just, can be unpardonably unjust. Once he has decided that Guildenstern and Rosencrantz have been sent for by Claudius, he never pauses to ask whether they may not be acting out of true friendship to him, whether their motives may do them no discredit. It is enough for him that his intuitions tell him that they are guilty, and he sends them to a death they certainly have not merited—as Horatio sees may be the case—and he does so without any regrets. The same quickness of temper which makes his discourse scintillate, prompts him to rapid decisions that can be grossly unfair. Thus, too, we listen in amazement as, at Ophelia's grave, he exclaims indignantly to Laertes:

Hear you, sir,
What is the reason that you use me thus?
I loved you ever.

V, i, 311 seq.

Because he is aware of having always thought only well of Laertes, he can forget that he has killed the young man's father, and that in reason Laertes might hate him as much as he himself hates Claudius.

It is a character with grave faults. [Some, among whom we do not wish to be numbered, would consider Hamlet's occasional adventures into ribaldry as a failing too. Mercutio is even looser of tongue than he, and
no one has ever held it against him. The license with which he and Hamlet sometimes speak is harmless, more a symptom in a young man of excessive vitality than an index of licentious character.] But its beauties are so extensive that there is copious room even for such shortcomings. It is a character of great scope, and such defects as are in it are commensurate with the virtues.

Before leaving the Prince, we think it interesting to note that there are three young men in the play in a similar circumstance—and perhaps so placed by the dramatist that we might gauge Hamlet's character the more accurately—Hamlet, Laertes, and Fortinbras. Each has had a father killed and each assumes the filial duty of avenging that death. In circumstances Hamlet is closer to Laertes: their fathers have been murdered secretly, or in a manner that is kept from the world. Fortinbras' father was killed in open combat by the late king of Denmark; the world knows the manner of his death, and Fortinbras is free to seek revenge when he collects an army to march against Denmark (I, i, 80 seq.). In character, however, Hamlet is closer to Fortinbras, and would act with his directness and honor. But he is not free, like him, to engage upon his task. Not having the low traits of Laertes, Hamlet is unwilling to go about achieving vengeance in the former's contemptible manner. Polonius' son is so much concerned about what the world will think of him if he does not at once kill someone—almost anyone—in return for his father's death, that he has not a thought for justice or honor. Unlike Hamlet, he can cry:

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.
   IV, v, 132 seq.

Though not a saint, Hamlet, when he is conscious of what he is doing, will not give the next world to negligence, nor will he damn his immortal soul; he desires justice as well as vengeance. Laertes is first ready to kill Claudius; having no greater motive than personal satisfaction, he is easily quieted by the resourceful King, and won over to a plot against Hamlet. No method is too nefarious for him; he would be willing "to cut his throat" even "in the church"; and he is quick to second Claudius' plan of an unbated sword with the suggestion of envenoming its point. These are short cuts to achieving an eye for an eye, but they are not such as Hamlet's noble nature would ever permit him to employ. If he were as luckily placed as Fortinbras, he would behave as does the Norwegian Prince; being situated as Laertes is, it is impossible for him to deal treacherously like him. Thus Hamlet stands between the two, a nobler Fortinbras situated as Laertes is situated, and unwilling to behave as Laertes would behave.

**KING CLAUDIUS**

For the dramatic contest, a hero of such dimension calls for an opponent worthy of him, and in Claudius Shakespeare has equipped Hamlet with a by-no-means contemptible adversary.

It is true, as Professor Adams observes, that Hamlet describes him as a "satyr," a "bat," a "filthy moor," a clown, and a toad, but we are not to fall into the trap with this commentator by calling this "abundant evidence that he is unattractive, even repulsive." So, too, Professor Bradley, on Hamlet's authority, says of Claudius that "he had a small nature… . He was a man of mean appearance—a mildewed ear, a toad, a bat; and he was also bloated by excess in drinking. People made mouths at him in contempt while his brother lived." Such is indeed Hamlet's portrait of him, but we should be as unwise to take the Prince's word for the picture, as to believe Claudius when he describes Hamlet to Laertes as malicious. Hamlet, unconcerned with being fair to his two old friends, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, will certainly be less so to the man he loathes. Mr. Masefield adds a touch unprovided by Hamlet when he says the King "fears intellect," thus making him akin, for no reason, to Julius Caesar. This ugly, drunken butcher has become all too familiar on the stage, and
there are good grounds for being sure that Shakespeare had no such person in mind when he created Claudius.

Gertrude, the last woman to run to adultery, was driven to it obviously by powerful physical attraction to her late husband's brother. To explain to the audience how such a conventional-minded woman could be compelled to indulge so inhibited a relationship, Claudius must be handsome, or at least attractive enough to make evident his sexual magnetism. A few critics have been fairer to him. Professor Jones wisely rejects Hamlet's prejudiced testimony, but he overstates the case by saying: "When Hamlet goes 'mad,' Claudius does everything that a reasonable and kindly man could be expected" to do. Kindly towards Hamlet, Claudius certainly never feels. Professor Kittredge, much closer to Shakespeare's intention than most, on the other hand, goes much too far: "King Claudius is a superb figure…. His intellectual powers are of the highest order. He is eloquent … always and everywhere a model of royal dignity … Intellectually, then, we must admit Claudius to as high a rank as Hamlet himself." The truth is that there are few men in world drama whom we can admit intellectually to as high a rank as Hamlet.

But Claudius is a highly intelligent man, capable, attractive, and well-fitted to rule a kingdom. Professor Bradley, allowing a disparity between the King's physical and mental attributes, grudgingly admits: "He is not without respectable qualities. As a king he is courteous and never undignified; he performs his ceremonial duties efficiently; and he takes good care of the national interests." We can put the case more strongly. Denmark is well-satisfied to have him on the throne. When Guildenstern says to him:

We both obey,
   And here give up ourselves, in the full bent
   To lay our services freely at your feet,
   To be commanded.

II, ii, 29 seq.

he is no more vilely selling his soul to the devil than are Voltimand and Cornelius, sent on a well-managed embassy to Norway, when they say:

   In that and all things will we show our duty.

I, ii, 40

Such, with public reason enough, are the sentiments of the entire court. We have no cause to believe that as a monarch he is inferior to the late king. Hamlet's father was a brave warrior and a scholar; but Claudius by skillful diplomacy keeps his country out of war. He speaks with elegance, courtesy, and intelligence, and it is easy to see why he is well liked. Such a man, of course, makes Hamlet's situation the more desperate. A bloated clown would render his case easier.

Claudius, for all his ability, if not debased and ignoble, is not, however, a noble character. The root of his criminality seems to be a completely materialistic nature, rarely touched by spiritual values; his is the temperament most at home in politics. He has thirsted for the power and riches of this life, and has been undeterred by principle in achieving them in the diretest way possible. Having dispatched his brother and married the Queen, he is quite anxious to live on good terms with Hamlet—not out of any kindliness towards him—but because if the Prince is willing to be affable, life will become completely agreeable for the King. He neither fears nor loves Hamlet, indeed must be well aware (intelligent as he is) of Hamlet's intense dislike of him; but a happy, well-contented stepson is all he needs to lay the disturbing memory of his brother's murder. It is for this reason that he perseveres in trying to win the Prince's good will and makes it clear that Hamlet is heir to the throne. Not that he particularly desires Hamlet's affection. But if Hamlet lives apparently at peace with his family, the world will the sooner forget the rapidity of Gertrude's remarriage and its incestuous nature.
Murderer though he is, he is not the worst of men. There is a kind of man who seems beyond all hope of salvation, the self-deceiving criminal, the hypocrite who is swift to lay the responsibility for his own evil at the door of others—such a blood-chilling creature as Shakespeare created in Angelo (in *Measure for Measure*). Claudius conceals very well from the world his criminality, but he plays no tricks with himself. When he is on his knees trying to pray to God for forgiveness, he knows full well that the miscreant cannot be forgiven while he clutches firm the prize for which he sinned. His terrible honesty at this moment wrenches our hearts with a twinge of compassion for him, and he somewhat merits it. He, at least, is the superior of those who fancy they can cheat Heaven by mouthing empty words of prayer, when in his misery he exclaims:

But O, what form of prayer
Can serve my turn? "Forgive me my foul murder"?
That cannot be; since I am still possessed
Of those effects for which I did the murder,
My crown, mine own ambition, and my queen.
May one be pardoned and retain the offence?

III, iii, 51 seq.

If he is not noble, there is a part of his life which partakes of nobility, and that is his love for his wife. It is very plain that he wished to marry Gertrude not for the crown alone but because of his love for her. He says as much to God, when he is baring his soul and its motives. It is the simple truth which, with the embarrassment of one man confessing his love of his wife to another, he delivers to Laertes, when the younger man asks him why, if Hamlet, as Claudius has said, "pursued" the King's life, Claudius took no measures against his stepson:

The Queen his mother
Lives almost by his looks; and for myself—
My virtue or my plague, be it either which—
She's so conjunctive to my life and soul,
That, as the star moves not but in his sphere,
I could not but by her.

IV, vii, 11 seq.

The testimony to the truth of this red-faced confession is everywhere in the play. You will notice that not once during the entire course of the drama does Claudius ever say a disparaging thing concerning Hamlet to the Queen. Moreover, Hamlet in their presence is untiring in his insults to the King; Claudius may bite his lip, but his answer to the Prince is always polite. He even pretends to construe the offending remark as a cordiality. A clever man, his motives, as with all of us, are mixed; his forbearance with Hamlet—publicly—can only redound to his credit and Hamlet's obloquy. But there is no doubt that his forced patience is also born of his desire to spare his Queen any hurt.

The priggish may point out that the tie between Claudius and Gertrude is a purely physical one. But aside from the question as to whether or not a purely physical tie exists anywhere except on the theoretic plane, even if such a love is not of the highest kind, it is love which is between them, and, Shakespeare plainly feels, such a love is better than no love at all. It certainly deserves being measured by its fruits, and Claudius' considerateness of Gertrude is the one truly elevated aspect of his character. He has spared her all participation in, all knowledge of her first husband's murder, and he continues sparing her by suppressing his growing hatred of Hamlet so that she need not be torn between her love for both of them. He definitely limits his own freedom of action against the Prince through his protectiveness of his wife, and for her sake bears the brunt of Hamlet's public derision—a difficult task for a man of his strong character.
Claudius, of course, unlike the others, at no time thinks Hamlet mad, though it is practicable for him to go along with the rumor. With the unquiet mind of the murderer, he interprets Hamlet's hostile conduct as indicating that the Prince may by some unimaginable means know more than he should. Claudius would give anything to be resolved on this point. Once the Mouse-trap reveals how much Hamlet does know, Claudius is quick to plan removing his enemy. And then his foe's own blunder gives him his perfect opportunity of ending the threat to his own security, and he at once seizes it.

QUEEN GERTRUDE

Shakespeare's portrait of the Queen is one of the most brilliant depictions in literature of the sentimentalist. Gertrude is a well-meaning, superficial woman of quick but shallow emotions. Her chief desire is to be happy and see everyone around her contented; like all sentimentalists she is touched by the distress of others but is quite unequal to the smallest of personal sacrifices that might be of help to them. Thus, she is so far superior to Polonius and Laertes, that she anticipates with pleasure Hamlet's marrying a "good girl" like Ophelia, even though she be a commoner; she is gentle and kind with the girl—until she is in trouble. At the news that Ophelia has become demented, Gertrude's first reaction is:

I will not speak with her.

And when she is told the girl's "mood will needs be pitied," answers in self-protection:

What would she have?

IV, v, 1 seq.

Gertrude does not wish to be unnerved by the sight of Ophelia's distress. Once Ophelia is safely dead, however, she can afford the luxury of tender rhetoric:

Sweets to the sweet; farewell!
(Scattering flowers)
I hoped thou shouldst have been my Hamlet's wife.
I thought thy bride-bed to have decked, sweet maid,
And not to have strewed thy grave.

Her love for her son is genuine enough, as far as it goes. She cannot understand why, with everyone else resigned to his father's death, he protracts his mourning—all of two months! She reminds him that "all that lives must die," that death is "common." When Hamlet bitterly throws the phrase back at her:

Ay, madam, it is common,

she completely misses his savage irony, and asks, in her obvious-minded way:

If it be,
Why seems it so particular with thee?
I, ii, 72 seq.

If only Hamlet would be sensible, is her feeling—if only he would be pleasant to his new father and forget the old, how charming life could be!
She is a soft creature, and affectionate—when the cost is not too high—and would like to see Hamlet marry for her own sake as well as his. She is delighted that her husband has sent for Guildenstern and Rosencrantz on the pretense that they may cheer their old friend and “draw him on to pleasures.” Her son's invitation to attend his play she welcomes as a symptom that he is recovering from sullenness, and she eagerly takes up the role of the indulgent mother.

One can imagine that she must have had her bad moments during her late husband's life whenever she had occasion to reflect on her infidelity to him; she is not the kind of woman who could be very happy in sin. But things always turn out for the best! Her husband luckily relieved her of a moral problem by dying, and she was able to marry her lover. It must have been with a sigh of thankfulness that she took on again the mantle of respectability. One can be sure that by the time the drama begins, she has quite forgotten her adultery, though it ended but two months earlier. This would explain her amazing conduct while the Mouse-trap is being presented. She watches it, personally unaffected, as she would watch any other mildly diverting entertainment, and Hamlet learns nothing about her guilt from her reactions. Knowing nothing of a murder, she naturally draws no analogy between the slayer of the little play and Claudius. But we should expect a woman of any depth to be startled by the close similarity to her own experience of that of the fickle Player Queen's. Gertrude fails to see herself reflected. How should this tale of adultery apply to her? The Player Queen is disloyal in her love, and she herself is a respectable married woman! She is so unmoved by the proceedings that Hamlet, foiled in his plan so far as she is concerned, is forced to ask during the performance:

Madam, how like you this play?

And with the clam of an impartial observer she answers:

The lady protests too much, methinks.

III, ii, 239-40

She has the impenetrable hide of your true sentimentalist.

When the Mouse-trap has upset Claudius in some way she does not fathom, she intends giving her son a sorrowful lecture on his filial ungraciousness. Hamlet's violence, however, frightens her out of the dramatics she has planned. Then after the shock of Polonius' death, horrifying to her gentle nature, she is forced by Hamlet for a few brief moments to listen to his torrent of accusation, and the worst of all her experiences commences: she is face to face with the unbeautiful truth about herself. Nothing is less endurable than his relentlessly holding up the glass for her soul; and in terror she cries out:

O, speak to me no more!
These words like daggers enter in mine ears.
No more, sweet Hamlet!

III, iv, 94-96

Suddenly the Ghost appears, and Hamlet holds discourse with what is apparently the vacant air, pointing out the figure that is invisible to her. Her terror ceases, and she murmurs:

Alas, he's mad!

III, iv, 105

—and one can almost hear her adding silently, "Thank God!" He's mad, and everything that he has said is a product of his madness. Nothing he has charged her with was really true—the likeness of that depraved woman he has so powerfully delineated is no portrait of her. Those dreadful words of his were only the ravings of a lunatic. She can forget them now. Rather she can luxuriate in a mother's concern for her poor son.
and his ruined mind!

It is almost unbearably pathetic to see, as Hamlet proceeds in his efforts to wake her conscience, torturing himself the while, how deluded he is in thinking he is making the slightest impression on her. He does not suspect that she has already forgotten his bitter charges, is already deaf to his renewal of them.

O Hamlet, thou hast cleft my heart in twain,
III, iv, 156

she weeps, and he imagines that her heart is broken to see how vile she has been. What she means, however, is that her mother-heart is cracked to witness how far gone is her poor son's mental sickness. As she wrings her hands over his plight, she has inwardly returned to her hitherto-undisturbed self-complacency.

[Though commentaries have been scant on Gertrude, she has had her share of critical distortions—all the way from the scholar who maintains she is a queenly woman who never committed adultery,18 to the feminine admiral who is convinced that in the last scene she deliberately commits suicide, drinking of a cup she suspects to be poisoned in order to warn her son against drinking too.19 This absurd notion was incorporated into Mr. Olivier's movie version, with what permanent damage to the play we can tell only when we know whether future productions will make it traditional, as they may. Gertrude, of course, had no way of knowing that the drink was envenomed.]

THE FAIR OPHELIA

Shakespeare's portrait of Ophelia is perhaps the most interesting depiction in world drama of a thoroughly uninteresting young woman. She has been compared with various of his other heroines, but actually he has drawn no one like her, except possibly Hero (of Much Ado), and even she has a few flashes of spirit. These two, alone among his women, resemble the type English heroine. The others are truly astounding in the modernity of their conception. One looks in vain for such flesh-and-blood creations as his in the whole range of the English novel (with the exception of the girls of Jane Austen and a very few of Dickens) up to the time of Meredith. How wishy-washy seem the traditional modest maidens to be found in the pages of Richardson, Fielding, Scott, and Dickens—a procession of heroines almost interchangeable—when measured with Juliet, Portia, Beatrice, Rosalind, Viola, Olivia, Isabella, Desdemona, Lady Macbeth, Cordelia, Helena, Cleopatra, Imogen, Hermione, Perdita, and Miranda, how vivid and colorless! No wonder that in exasperation with those English Patient Griseldas Thackeray created his little rogue of a Becky—and then fell victim to the tradition when he conceived his Amelia! Shakespeare's girls are real women, full of charm and warmth and intelligence, most of them witty and gay too. Ophelia is the exception. She is the quiet, modest, submissive, spiritless fair creature dear to the heart of English fiction. Unhappily such girls do exist (though, luckily, in diminishing numbers—one of the few improvements of modern times); many parents have assiduously educated their girl-children to be that sort of "good" girl. And since they do exist, Shakespeare may very well have felt that he needed Ophelia to make his gallery of women complete. She is, moreover, the perfect foil for his hero, the perfect heroine for his story. Anyone less insipid would have dimmed the brightness of his hero and tempered the bitterness of the circumstances in which Hamlet is involved.

If you wish to convert a healthy child into Ophelia's kind of plaint creature without will, the approved method is to suppress every one of her normal impulses as soon as she manifests it, every symptom that she may be thinking independently of your direction. To make her good, as you define goodness, you render her incapable of expressing an emotion (beyond weeping, of course, which you will commend as proper to modesty), incapable of an original thought or motion. Your child, thus trained, will be thoroughly marketable in the marriage mart; you also ensure an uneventful life for her and a maddeningly dull one for her spouse.
In this technique of rearing such a maiden, Polonius has been past master—like all fathers who prefer libertines for sons and nuns for daughters. He has her completely bullied. She is accustomed to delivering up to him her most private thoughts. She allows him to intercept her mail without demurring—fancy what would occur if anyone dared tamper with letters addressed to Portia, Beatrice, or Isabella! But Ophelia cannot imagine rebelling or even objecting. She listens to his endless sermons—and when he becomes short-winded, her brother takes up where he left off. She listens to both with docility, and thinks them very knowing in the ways of the world. The one concern they have is that she keep her maidenhead intact until she is safely married; that is their (and how many others') conception of keeping a maid virtuous. They succeed. She always does as she is told, and follows her father's commands to the letter—at the price of her happiness. She has come to be utterly dependent on his management of her life. Without it she is lost. She never says a truer word than, when her father asks if she can be such a fool as to think Hamlet sincere in his honorable professions, her honest admission:

I do not know, my lord, what I should think.
I, iii, 104

That is her customary frame of mind. She has been taught to place no stock in her intuitions, to form no judgment of her own. Her heart tells her that Hamlet's love is true and honorable; but if her brother and father both assure her that it cannot be, she finds it safer to credit them.

It has been asked how so brilliant and vital a man as Hamlet could possibly love a girl as vapid as Ophelia. Ah! If one could answer that, one could also answer why in life A marries B, why X loves Y. Such disparities between men and women in love are only too common. Probably the last mystery science will ever solve is the cause of love.

About Ophelia commentary has been almost as lunatic as about her lover. Of course, most men have not really approved of such high-spirited and intellectual girls as Shakespeare usually created; Beatrice, for instance, has come in for a great deal of disparagement because of her blazing wit; and some critics have been appalled at the possibility of any man's marrying so irrepressible a woman. Ophelia, therefore, has had her particular devotees; it is to be feared that there are still too many insecure men who idealize her sort of nincompoop. Samuel Johnson speaks of her as "the beautiful, the harmless, and the pious," censuring Hamlet for his treatment of her. In the nineteenth century she is described as "like an artless, gladsome, and spotless Shepherdess… The world … is not worthy of her." The Germans, who prefer her type as excellent material for a worthy hausfrau, have adored her. One of them says that in her he sees "a gentle violet, a truthful, modest German girl, a completely Nordic woman's temperament—poor in words, shut up within herself, not knowing how to express with her lips her deep rich heart. She is akin to Cordelia and Desdemona … She is thoroughly German, old German, in her family relationships." There is little quarrel, then, as to the passivity of her character; the only difference would seem to be whether or not one can admire it. Few of her admirers, however, go so far as to count her losing her mind as another grace: "There is something very poetical in Ophelia's sharing her Hamlet's destiny,—even in the very form,—a mind diseased,—in which it has come upon him. Her pure and selfless love reflects even this state of her beloved; no cup is so bitter but that if it is poured out for him she will drink it with him. Nay, she, the gentle, unresisting woman, drains to the dregs that which his masculine hand can push aside (at least for a time) when he has but tasted it. United as their hearts were by love, this madness of Ophelia brings her closer to Hamlet than any prosperity could have done." [Ophelia's madness must certainly have given demonic strength to their love if it could bring them closer—when we remember that during the period which witnessed her loss of mind and her death, he was away at sea.] Greater love than this hath no woman for her lover: that she become insane to keep him company!

It is rather around the matter of "Hamlet's treatment of Ophelia" that the discussion has raged. Nothing in the history of the criticism of this play astonishes more than that this should be a mysterious issue, for nothing is
made plainer in the tragedy itself. Nevertheless, Professor Wilson perfectly reflects critical opinion when he says, "The attitude of Hamlet towards Ophelia is without doubt the greatest of all the puzzles in the play, greater even than that of the delay itself." 24 It is the part of the drama that most disturbed Professor Bradley, too, who found it impossible "to account for the disgusting and insulting grossness of his language to her," 25 and who says again, "I am unable to arrive at a conviction as to the meaning of some of his words and deeds, and I question whether from the mere text of the play a sure interpretation of them can be drawn"; 26 the conclusion forced upon this eminent scholar is that Hamlet's love for Ophelia "was not an absorbing passion." 27

The most common view, however, is that Hamlet has loved Ophelia sincerely, but that his mother's swift marriage after his father's death has poisoned his feelings towards the entire sex, and it is for this reason that Ophelia becomes, as Goethe describes her, "Forsaken, cast off, and despised." 28 Hartley Coleridge puts the case thus: "Hamlet loved Ophelia in his happy youth, when all his thoughts were fair and sweet as she. But his father's death, his mother's frailty, have wrought sad alteration in his soul, and made the very form of woman fearful and suspected. His best affections are blighted, and Ophelia's love, that young and tender flower, escapes not the general infection." 29 Such a view cooperates (as does that of the psychoanalysts, that "he rejects Ophelia" because of his Oedipus complex), of course, with a conception of Hamlet which we have already thrown into the discard: a Hamlet morbid, melancholy, and neurotic. It is based usually on his outburst, during his first soliloquy:

Frailty, thy name is woman!
I, ii, 146

But it will be noted that he does not say that Frailty's name is Ophelia; that is to say, it is of his mother he is thinking and speaking when he delivers that line. And there is no reason why a young man of wholesome mind who is properly disgusted with his mother's licentious conduct should transfer that disgust to his sweetheart without occasion.

Another widely accepted view is that Hamlet rejects Ophelia because he must give all his energies, all his thoughts, all his attention to the task of vengeance. A mid-nineteenth-century critic phrases it: "There could be no stern resolution to abandon every purpose of existence, that he might devote himself, unfettered, to his revenge; nor was ever resolution better observed. He breaks through his passion for Ophelia, and keeps it down, under the most trying circumstances, with such inflexible firmness, that an eloquent critic has seriously questioned whether his attachment was real." 30 Gervinus elaborates the conception by interpreting the "Get thee to a nunnery" scene as "the farewell of an unhappy heart to a connection broken by fate; it is the serious advice of a self-interested lover, who sends his beloved to a convent because he grudges her to another, and sees the path of his own future lie in hopeless darkness." 31 Sometimes Hamlet's "rejection of Ophelia" is put on a less self-conscious base; as Schlegel expresses it, "he is too much overwhelmed with his own sorrow to have any compassion to spare for others." 32

However convincing such rejection may sound in the abstract, however conceivable on the part of an emotionally unbalanced man, it is perfect nonsense, in terms of human experience, to think it possible to a healthy young man. No normally constituted lover renounces love because he has a great problem to deal with. It is precisely in such crises that the male is most in need of a woman's affection; the greater the problem the greater will be his urge to rely upon the consolation of such affection. It is simply not human to think of Hamlet as giving up Ophelia because he must concentrate on avenging his father—and, moreover, nothing of the kind is said or demonstrated in the play.

Several critics have thought that Hamlet has seduced Ophelia, 33 and Tieck gives a peculiarly unpleasant version of that: "The poet has meant to intimate throughout the piece that the poor girl, in the ardor of her passion for the fair prince, has yielded all to him. The hints and warnings of Laertes come too late…. At the
acting of the play before the court, Ophelia has to endure all sorts of coarseness from Hamlet before all the courtiers; he treats her without that respect which she appears to him to have long forfeited." 34 It is to be hoped that this piece of nineteenth-century morality will make the reader shudder, and think his own era not so bad after all.

Other odd explanations of the Hamlet-Ophelia relationship have been advanced. Quiller-Couch observes that in the old Hamlet story the prototype of Ophelia was a prostitute: Shakespeare altered her character to make her innocent, but made her act as though she were a loose woman. 35 (An extraordinary feat in drama!) Adams imagines that Hamlet thinks "Claudius has foul designs upon the innocence of Ophelia." 36 Almost the extremest of these positions is Wilson's: Hamlet "treats Ophelia like a prostitute" 37 because she agreed to trap him for Polonius and the King; this Wilson thinks the only solution to "the greatest of all puzzles in the play."

It has remained, however, for a Spanish critic to push this hectic view of the Hamlet-Ophelia relationship to the limits of incredibility. Madariaga, whose Hamlet is a monster of monomania, exclaims: "The idea that Hamlet could be in love with anybody but himself is incompatible with Hamlet's character 38 … Hamlet was at no time in love with Ophelia," 39 nor was she ever in love with Hamlet, the proof of her emotions being her "acquiescence in her father's designs." 40 Merely, through the call of the flesh, Hamlet and Ophelia have "strayed into intimacy without much depth of love." 41 They are two sophisticates who have loaned each other the use of their bodies for mutual pleasure, and Ophelia has "been free enough with her favors" to the prince who by this time is marginally bored with her. 42 (Had the play been a Restoration comedy, this interpretation might make some sense—provided, of course, that even in that period the dramatist had been someone other than Shakespeare.)

The only correct answer to the question as to why Hamlet rejects Ophelia is the same as the answer to the question as to why he procrastinates: he doesn't. We confess that to us "the greatest of all puzzles" about the play is how this particular question ever became a puzzle. Certainly Shakespeare could not have been clearer.

What happens is not that Hamlet rejects Ophelia—such a move would never occur to him—but that, as any young man would interpret her conduct, Ophelia rejects Hamlet. Shakespeare devoted an entire scene (I, iii), and several additional passages, in exposition of the fact. Nothing else develops in that scene but the departure of Laertes—a matter of no dramatic importance, which could have been managed by report or even taken for granted when Polonius later sends Reynaldo to spy on him. But Shakespeare uses the scene of Laertes' departure to further our comprehension of the rift to come between Hamlet and Ophelia. About to leave for foreign parts, Laertes lectures his timid sister, warning her that she must suspect Hamlet of evil designs upon her maidenhead. The pusillanimous Ophelia assures him quite sincerely:

I shall the effect of this good lesson keep
As watchman to my heart.
(45-6)

And she means it. There are never subtle shadings in the discourse of Ophelia: her simple speech is the expression of a simple mind. Though Laertes is no way gifted to understand either the heart or the head of a man like Hamlet, his sister is so habituated to being directed by her father and brother that she is at least willing to weigh his counsel. Now Polonius comes in to repeat the lecture. When Laertes has left, the old man turns upon her, and we are witness to the bullying process by which he has stamped all vitality out of her:

I must tell you
You do not understand yourself so clearly
As it behoves my daughter and your honour.
What is between you? Give me up the truth.
(95-8)
He laboriously seconds Laertes' certainty about Hamlet's wicked intentions, and pooh-poohs Hamlet's vows of love as well-tested traps to ensnare a green girl—as he knows from his own experience:

I do know,
When the blood burns, how prodigal the soul
Lends the tongue vows.
(115-17)

She, as ever, does not know what to think, and so Polonius makes up her mind for her. She is to have nothing more to do with Hamlet.

Being what she is, the spiritless girl faithfully obeys him. Two months later he is able to report to his monarchs that she has locked herself from Hamlet's "resort," admitted "no messengers," received "no tokens," and handed over to her father his letters, one of which he proceeds to read aloud, with critical asides, to Claudius and Gertrude (II, ii, 107 seq.).

No explanation given him, no communication answered, what is Hamlet to think of Ophelia but that she has found it suddenly expedient to break with him, at a time when he has no friends at court? He feels that she has renounced him when most he needs her love, that she is a time-server like her father, that she finds it advantageous to avoid him while he is surrounded by enemies. It is to be sure of this judgment that he forces his way into her room, as he must do if he is to see her at all. There, frightened by his abrupt entry, so unlike his normal courtly behavior, she is too much pulverized by her father's threats to explain to Hamlet why he has not seen her, why she has not been able to write to him. Because of Polonius' orders, she stands before him petrified into silence, and confused. Her confusion, naturally, certifies Hamlet's worst fears.

Then as ever, under her father's thumb, she allows herself to be used as a bait so that Polonius and the King may overhear what Hamlet may have to say to her. It is their first meeting in a long time, with the exception of his anguished storming of her room. This is the crisis of their relationship, and it is Ophelia's complete want of courage which makes the encounter catastrophic to both of them. The poor creature, trapped by Polonius' tyranny, hopes somehow that the gesture of forcing into Hamlet's hands his former gifts will cause him to understand what she knows not how to put into words without disobeying her father. She is the forlorn maiden waiting in her prison tower to be rescued by her fair knight, who does not even know she is there. Alas! such maidens, who cannot make clear their needs, are likely to wait forever for their rescuer.

Knowing her father is listening to all she says, what can she do in her impotence but weep bitterly, weep because her lover does not guess the heavy burden she bears, weep because she cannot tell him, weep because he does not contrive to rescue her from it? Most of Shakespeare's heroines would never have been so unreasonably obedient to their father as to find themselves in such an impasse. But all women expect the unintuitive male to understand without explanations—to know that a rejection is not necessarily a rejection, that a situation is nothing like what it appears to be. Having no clue to her two months' avoidance of him, despite his quick-wittedness, Hamlet can only conclude that she is playing a hypocritical game with him—at a court of hypocrites.

From this time on he naturally tries to kill his love for her, but he never succeeds in doing so. How deep his love remains, we witness at her funeral. It is truly ludicrous to have to consider the to-do raised by criticism over "the disgusting and insulting grossness of his language to her in the play scene." A few bawdy jests lightly tossed off (and mixed, it is true, with some withering sarcasms because of her having trapped him earlier that day, as he thinks)—partly the product of his excitement at the performance of "The Murder of Gonzago," partly an attempt to appear gay enough to disarm any possible suspicions of Claudius”—why should they be construed so heavily? Ophelia accepts them in the merry vein in which they are intended—that much may be said for her—and seems even pleased at Hamlet's sallies as signifying his recovery of high
spirits. Though assuredly a "nice girl," if ever there was one, she understands his bawdry very well, and gives no token of being really offended with it. She reproves him almost with an embarrassed titter which shows that she is quite pleased with him—in a way that women often do at such moments. Moreover, the standards for decency were quite different in the days before Puritanism so much altered the English character. Many of Shakespeare's most exquisite heroines deliver themselves of ribaldries that would have made a Victorian damsel feel obliged to faint only to hear. Certainly no one would censure the morals of Portia or Beatrice because they own a robust sense of humor; and Desdemona listens to the "indecencies" of Iago without making a scene, but rather encourages him to continue with his merriment. Ophelia, even though her speech (until she loses her mind) would satisfy the most rigid Victorian code, as an Elizabethan would have been accustomed to taking ribald merriment in her stride. That she was by no means unfamiliar with it is proved by the fact that in her madness she sings a song of such bawdiness as matches anything Hamlet says. Obviously she has not only heard the ditty, but memorized it as well. This is a stupid point to have to discuss, and one leaves it willingly.

Her misery over her situation, over her lover's madness (thus she accounts for his severity towards her), and then over her father's death and Hamlet's exile proves too much for her weak spirit to bear, and she loses what little mind she ever had. Without her father's commands she hardly knows how to live. It is in her madness that she at last touches us with deep pity. Shakespeare nowhere shows himself a sublimer artist than in the manner in which he gives us to understand during the ravings of her disordered mind how fearful was her life in her father's household—through the fragments of her vagrant thoughts we read the dreadful subjection of her days, all the dread things she has overheard, all the unspeakable things she knows but has had to suppress within herself lest they leap into the light, all the terrible cost of her filial obedience. Shakespeare's genius enabled him to reveal the mysterious workings of the unconscious mind in the "mad scenes," centuries before the Freudian theories, and not in the dangerous clinical manner of the psychoanalysts, but, like the true artist, as an imitation of life as it is lived.

It should be observed, by the way, that the madness of Ophelia might readily have settled the question of Hamlet's reputed madness or feigned madness. As Shakespeare shows us her loss of mind, we find it much resembling the madness of Lear and the pretended madness of Edgar—these three examples clearly exhibiting Shakespeare's method of representing insanity on the stage. All three appear more or less fantastically garbed, all three speak without order or logical sequence, all three are unaware (except for moments of clarity) of the identity of the people they address. That fact alone should deal the death-blow to any wisp of a suspended judgment on the question as to whether or not Shakespeare intended the Prince to be understood either as mad or feigning madness. Hamlet's dress is the normal dress for mourning, his remarks are always to the point and flow in recognizable order, and he is always very much aware of to whom it is he speaks, much more aware than his interlocutor (or often the critic) remotely guesses!

**POLONIUS**

With the exception of the Prince himself, Polonius and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are the persons of the drama most frequently misrepresented on the stage.

Actors interpret Polonius either as a charming old man, running over with sound opinion, and an affectionate, indulgent father; or as a pleasant but somewhat befuddled councilor, with the best of intentions in the world. Among the critics the most extreme tribute paid to him has been that of Tieck: "I see in Polonius a real statesman. Discreet, politic, keen-sighted, ready at the council-board, cunning upon occasions, he had been valued by the deceased King, and is now indispensable to his successor." As regards the old man's intelligence, even Samuel Johnson's famous "dotage encroaching on wisdom," though nearer the truth, is a characterization far too generous. That Polonius did serve the late King is an indication that he may once have possessed some ability; but it must have been entirely in the realm of politics. He has the kind of mind, often to be met with in the business and professional worlds, that by its shrewd concentration upon material
successes achieves its goal at the cost of everything else. He is devoid of warmth, humanity, and affection (except for his son), and gives symptoms of never having known a spiritual impulse in his life. A career of making all his acts subservient to self-advancement has in the end deadened even his practical cunning. At the age we meet him he is certainly indispensable to no one. Nothing is left of his ability and shrewdness but a few tags, a few catch-phrases, to which, even when they do express some grains of truth, he pays scant heed in his own demeanor. It is he, for example, who utters the celebrated:

\[ \text{brevity is the soul of wit} \]
\[ \text{II, ii, 90} \]

—a profound truth; but no character in Shakespeare is so long-winded as Polonius. He is always threatening to be brief, is always about to sum up in a few words—and continues to harangue his audience by the hour.

We never encounter him doing a wise or creditable thing, or giving anyone intelligent counsel. He is, in short, a dotard of the most limited horizons, a clumsy fool who stands in his own light. Understanding the world from his own unenlightening experiences, he is honest enough in refusing to believe that Hamlet could possibly wish to marry anyone so far below him in rank as Ophelia. Though Hamlet's intentions were entirely honorable, and even the Queen approved her son's choice, Polonius in Hamlet's place would never have made such a disadvantageous match.

He is very well pleased with his own feeble mind, however, and thinks he knows the answers to all questions. His inability to follow the speed of Hamlet's intellect is merely evidence to him (and many critics) that the Prince is "far gone." Besides being an ass, he is, of course, a time-server, always the friend to the party in power, with the keen scent of politicians for which way the wind is blowing.

It is probably an uncritical admiration for the well-known advice he gives Laertes before his son's departure for Paris which is responsible for Polonius' reputation for wisdom. That passage has been memorized by generations of unhappy school children, as though it were an ideal guide to the good life. Listened to carefully, however, though containing a few acceptable platitudes, it turns out to be admirable enough as precepts for getting on in the world; but the man who followed it would certainly be cheated of experience's richest rewards. Yet the phraseology of this speech has echoed down the centuries—for no good reason. What has been the point of mouthing

\[ \text{And it must follow as the night the day} \]
\[ \text{I, iii, 79} \]

as though it were the sublimest instead (as Shakespeare intended) of the emptiest of images, a perfect reflection of the obvious-mindedness of the dotard who speaks it? In the advice there are, as we have said, some truisms, but such platitudes

\[ \text{so extreme in date,} \]
\[ \text{It were superfluous to state!} \]

Keep the friends you have tried; do not be running after new ones; dress well but not gaudily—even a dunce knows that much. But the passage taken as a whole contains nothing admirable.

\[ \text{This above all: to thine own self be true} \]

sounds noble enough—until you realize that in context it can only mean, "Be true to your own material advantage; see to it that you line your pockets well." For Polonius advises: Do not go about letting people know what you really are thinking; let others confide in you and express their opinions as much as they
wish—but keep your own counsel. Avoid getting into a quarrel, but once you are in it see that you win (no
matter, apparently, whether you are in the right or the wrong). Remember that clothes make the man. Never
lend money; that is the way to lose money and friend. Never borrow money; that discourages habits of thrift.

Such guidance will do for those who wish to make the world their prey, but it is dignified by no humanity.
Who can live humanly without ever borrowing or lending? Is one to turn his back on his best friend in an hour
of need? Will the sensible man grieve when he has lost what he took to be a friend because of a loan made
him? Does he not rather congratulate himself at having made a good investment, no matter what the sum, at
having paid little for so important a discovery? Polonius, naturally, can give to his son only the crass
philosophy which molded his own career. (How different is the precept of the noble Countess of Rousillon,
who is able to hold as a model to her son a father quite other than Polonius—who need only remind him what
he owes to his line, when she would teach him how to live:

Be thou blest, Bertram! and succeed thy father
In manners as in shape! thy blood and virtue
Contend for empire in thee; and thy goodness
Share with thy birthright! Love all, trust a
few,
Do wrong to none: be able for thy enemy
Rather in power than use; and keep thy friend
Under thy own life’s key.

All’s Well That Ends Well,

I, i, 70 seq.

Like everyone else in the play, Polonius’s character is to be gauged by the way he behaves. He bullies his
daughter, crushing every spark of life out of her. He sends a spy after his son to discover just what the young
man is up to in Paris (II, i). His emissary, in order to draw out the Danish colony in Paris, is himself to slander
Laertes first. He is to describe him as "very wild," addicted to what Polonius thinks the "usual slips" of youth.
Such as gambling? inquires Reynaldo. Yes, answers Polonius—gambling, or drinking, or swearing, or
quarreling, or frequenting houses of prostitution. The servant, finer than the master, is astounded that he must
so besmirch Laertes’ character. But to Polonius these vices are to be expected of the "fiery mind"—he
remembers his own youth! Reynaldo is not to go too far, however; he is not to represent Laertes as a
steady
patron of bawdyhouses. And why all this invention? Because, Polonius assures his man,

Your bait of falsehood takes this carp of truth:

some Dane will be sure to come forward with the information that he has indeed seen Laertes gambling, or
drunk, or quarreling, or entering "a house of sale—videlicet, a brothel." Having learned this, Reynaldo is to
allow Laertes free rein. One cannot but conclude that Polonius is less worried that his son may be leading a
vicious life than that it may not be vicious enough.

He is, in short, a notable upholder of a double standard for men and women. Ophelia is to make her prime
concern retaining her virginity; Laertes may drink, swear, quarrel, and patronize the prostitutes—all in
moderation. These vices would prove his son a youth of spirit. There is, unluckily, many a Polonius among
fathers, suppressing his daughters’ simplest human impulses, but eager to encourage his sons to be what he
likes to think of himself as having been, a reckless young devil. Having learned nothing from life, having
given nothing to it, their hope is to have their sons follow in their foot-steps, to learn no more and give no
more.

Polonius’ most obvious trait is, of course, his tendency to become lost in words, the index of a befuddled brain
which cannot follow through with an idea, which inevitably loses the thread in a labyrinth of verbiage. He
might be considered, indeed, almost entirely a comic character were it not for the darker side of his nature which prevents our taking him too lightly. But his mental confusion, his being forever trapped by language, is certainly laugh-provoking. He is like an athlete practising on one of those treadmills which require one's running fast if one is to stay in the same place. So Polonius puffs away at words; the more of them he employs, the less he advances what he is trying to say. He could be said to sound like a walking thesaurus, if his words were not so dull, for he is unable to express the simplest notion without the aid of many synonyms. The more his phrases pile up, the less he contrives to say. Thus, while he is reporting his theory of the cause of Hamlet's "madness," he begins with the premise that the Prince is mad. Although Claudius and Gertrude are both prepared to grant him that, Polonius must embellish the idea—can no more put it aside than if it were glued to him:

I will be brief. Your noble son is mad.  
Mad call I it; for, to define true madness,  
What is't but to be nothing else but mad? …  
That he is mad, 'tis true; 'tis true 'tis pity,  
And pity 'tis 'tis true. …  
Mad let us grant him then; and now remains  
That we find out the cause of this effect,  
Or rather say, the cause of this defect,  
For this effect defective comes by cause. …

Words, words, and nothing! At last he comes to Ophelia, and again he begins by announcing a truth no one would dispute:

I have a daughter;

even this, however, he cannot allow to pass without some addition:

—have while she is mine.  
II, ii, 92 seq.

The stupidity of this old fossil is excruciatingly funny. His dullness is in complete contrast to, and thus makes a perfect foil for, Hamlet's lightning-like rapidity; Hamlet's mind is all light and his is all fog.

One can understand, nevertheless, why some critics have felt that Polonius is "indispensable" to Claudius, despite the folly of his suggestions. It will be noted that the King always seems to be complimenting him quite effusively. Such, at first, would seem very odd behavior on the part of a man as clever and strong-minded as Claudius, whom one would expect only to be irritated at the constant attendance of a pedantic fool. Why does he even tolerate the old buffoon, who must be a sore trial to his patience? Why is he forever at pains to smooth him down? To Laertes Claudius says before the whole court:

The head is not more native to the heart,  
The hand more instrumental to the mouth,  
Than is the throne of Denmark to thy father.  
I, ii, 47 seq.

This is fairly extravagant praise, considering the intelligence of the speaker and the dim-wittedness of the subject. Later, to Polonius himself he says:

Thou still hast been the father of good news.  
II, ii, 42
In the middle of the old man's recital of Ophelia's obedient rejection of Hamlet's communications, Polonius invites the offer of another bouquet, and it is forthwith presented to him:

POL. What do you think of me?
KING. As of a man faithful and honorable.

II, ii, 129-30

And again:

POL. Hath there been such a time—I'd fain know that—
That I have positively said, "'Tis so,"
When it proved otherwise?
KING. Not that I know.

II, ii, 153 seq.

Why should Claudius be so anxious to please him? Why should he choose to retain him as his counselor at all? The obvious answer (and in light of it, we may justly interpret Polonius' quoted remarks as a reminder to the King of his indebtedness to him) is that the old man's position under Hamlet's father must have borne considerable weight in winning the election of the crown for Claudius. So much we take for granted about this time-server.

But do not Polonius' words remind Claudius of a deeper indebtedness? Does not Claudius retain the old man's services because he has no other choice?

There is a certain amount of evidence in the play which would point to Polonius' being rather worse than an old bore and time-server to his being more nefarious than his white hairs would suggest. Why should Claudius, for example, after the Mouse-trap has revealed to him that Hamlet knows of the late king's murder, run so great a risk as to commission Polonius' listening behind the arras in Gertrude's chamber, when the King must know that Hamlet will speak of that murder to his mother? Why should he allow anyone to hear that tale? Why should he put the possession of such knowledge—even if it were only to be taken as a rumor not to be credited—in the hands of Polonius—why, unless Polonius already knows all about the murder, unless nothing he could hear would be news to him? In short, was not Polonius an accomplice in the murder of Hamlet's father? Such a deed as Claudius committed is almost impossible to manage singlehanded. Who would have been in a better position to assist him, who readier (in exchange for future favors) to assist him, than Polonius? It is entirely within the possibilities of his character that the old councilor should have been a partner in arranging the slaying, and it would explain Claudius' endless and otherwise incredible patience with him. And it would explain too the King's willingness to have Polonius an audience to Hamlet's talk with Gertrude; Claudius is certainly not the man to jeopardize his security under the circumstances with any man, unless that man were already as much involved in the crime as himself. It would add weight to the argument to remember that it is Polonius, moreover, who puts an end to the acting of the Mouse-trap when the King rises too agitated to stop the performance by word of mouth himself.

OPH. The King rises.
HAM. What, frightened with false fire?
QUEEN. How fares my lord?
POL. Give o'er the play.

III, ii, 276 seq.

The accusation against Polonius as an accomplice in the murder has been maintained by a few critics, and, we believe, with reason. As a matter of fact, ... Ophelia's mad scene would seem to contain fairly conclusive
proof of his cooperation in the killing of Hamlet's father.

It is nevertheless undeniable that Shakespeare has preferred to leave this point in the background of the play, so that we are never more than dimly aware of it as a possibility. He had two chief reasons for underplaying Polonius' guilt:

1. He did not want to burden the portrait of Polonius to the extent that he must cease to be a source of comedy in the play—as he must if we consciously think of him as co-conspirator in the murder.
2. Polonius' complicity is not important to the plot. It is rather part of the story's background, and therefore does not merit undue prominence. (Shakespeare is always remarkable in knowing when to avoid unnecessary explanations. He knew that in plays where every trifling detail is explained and given full attention, the background tends to disappear altogether, everything moves up to the foreground, and the picture loses dimension.)

Shakespeare plainly wished us to do no more than strongly suspect Polonius of nefariousness. Since he chose to imply rather than to represent his complicity, it devolves upon us to feel vaguely about the whole matter too, but to feel strongly that Polonius is a repulsive old man, whose death causes pity not for himself, but for the reckless Prince who must perforce pay a heavy price for it.

[Counterbalancing the popular overkindly view of Polonius' character is a particularly mad one of the German critic Flathe, who finds: that the whole "Polonius family" is a collection of heartless, ruthless, ambitious creatures, more important to the play than Claudius; that they are all straining for royal power; that Ophelia has no love for Hamlet but falls in with her father's machinations because she wishes to be Queen; that they all use Hamlet's madness for their own ends, and play upon it; that when Hamlet ceases to love Ophelia, Polonius' furious ambition blinds him to the fact to the length that he brings about his own death; that Ophelia loses her mind because her father's death puts an end to her hopes for the throne, etc., etc.]

LAERTES

Laertes is a chip off the old block. Did an early death not cut him off in time, what Polonius is he would become. The unattractiveness of his character does not strike us so forcibly, however, because he is a young man. He has some of the dash, hence some of the charm, of youth; he is young enough to be capable of passionate emotion; the genuineness of his love for his father and sister indicates potentialities superior to Polonius. That capacity for love prevents our detesting him.

But he is undoubtedly headed the same way as his father. His moral strictures to Ophelia are identical with those of Polonius, and proceed from the same narrow limitations of values. He, too, cannot believe in Hamlet's sincerity of love only because the latter is a prince; he, too, defines virtue for his sister in terms of her maidenhead; he, too, believes it best for her to distrust her emotions till the marriage-knot has been safely tied. And he, too, believes in one code of morals for his sister and another for himself. When Ophelia, heeding his warning, recommends his advice to himself to live chastely too, he brushes her off with:

O, fear me not.

I, iii, 51

While he has already displayed his father's penchant for sermonizing her, he is not at all disposed to be lectured to by her, however briefly.

But it is on his return to Denmark that his unpleasanter side is exposed to us. How differently from Hamlet he goes about avenging a father's murder! His recklessness, unsupported by either the intelligence or the noblemindedness of a Hamlet, precipitates him into the vilest sort of behavior. It is clear that the chief
ingredient in his furious need of revenge is his concern about the world's opinion of him if he does not at once kill—anybody—in retaliation:

QUEEN. Calmly, good Laertes.
LAER. That drop of blood that's calm proclaims
me bastard,
Cries cuckold to my father. …

IV, v, 116 seq.

This regard for the esteem of others causes him to feel the lack of ceremony attending his father's burial as almost as great a catastrophe as the old man's death itself:

his obscure burial—
No trophy, sword, nor hatchment o'er his bones,
No noble rite nor formal ostentation—
Cry to be heard, as 'twere from heaven to earth …

IV, v, 213 seq.

His grief is real enough; but he is making a fuss partly because he feels it expected of him. His attitude is in marked contrast to Hamlet's indifference to the opinion of others.

Rash without nobility or a desire for justice, he is no match for Claudius. Though storming the palace with a rabble, and ready to take the King's life in revenge, he is quickly wound around the monarch's little finger, and before he knows it is apologizing for his threats.

When Claudius presently identifies Hamlet as the slayer of Polonius, we see Laertes at his worst. He is unconcerned with the facts—Hamlet, after all, did not deliberately commit murder—and is anxious only to get even, no matter how dishonorably. He would be willing to cut the Prince's throat even in a church, is willing to jeopardize his own immortal soul, will stoop to the most nefarious means—as long as he succeeds in killing Hamlet. While Hamlet cannot think of using any method of vengeance inconsistent with his own dignity, Laertes, having no such commodity, is prepared to employ any means. The King's plan of arranging for an unbated sword in the fencing match is vile enough, but it is Laertes who at once offers to anoint his sword with a mortal poison, a scheme worthy of the lowest kind of villain. Laertes is, of course, not that; our disgust with his methods is somewhat tempered by the sincerity of his anguish. Nevertheless, his proneness to base trickery reveals capacities for unlimited treachery.

His virility is only of the obvious kind, the kind his father has approved of, but it lacks any moral stature. When Hamlet publicly apologizes for his conduct at Ophelia's grave, Laertes, did he possess any quality, must feel ashamed of the part he has agreed to play, and is still in time to renounce it. Instead, he hypocritically pretends to accept Hamlet's friendly overtures at the very moment he knows his murderous purposes are in a matter of minutes to make an end of the other.

The best of him is his strong family feeling. But even here, though he wins our sympathy, we must feel the same distaste that is Hamlet's for his melodramatic display of emotion at his sister's grave. The emotion is sincere, but experience teaches us that those who can make a great show of feeling on such occasions are never those who feel most deeply. Unlike Hamlet, he weeps easily. He feels as deeply as he can, but the very excess of his exhibition points to a quick recovery.

What he is, Polonius in all likelihood once was. Thus are we forced to judge him.
[E. K. Ilyin has made available the record of a conversation held in French between Gordon Craig and Stanislavski in 1909 on the stage of the Moscow Art Theatre, where the young Craig had been invited to stage *Hamlet*. The discussion, taken down in Russian by a co-producer of Stanislavski’s, is quite amusing to read not only because Craig’s discomfort is obvious (possibly it was owing to the annoyance of seeing his words being transcribed as they came out) but also because his opinions about Polonius and his two children are very lively. Almost the first thing he says is: “Laertes is basically nothing but a little Polonius” (almost our own very words for years before the article was printed). Stanislavski expresses surprise that there should be anything “different” about that family. Yes, Craig assures him, “a fatuous stupid family.” Ophelia too? “I am afraid so. She must be both stupid and lovely at the same time. … Like the whole family … she is a terrible nonentity. … All the advice that Laertes and his father give Ophelia shows their extraordinary pettiness and insignificance.” Stanislavski simply cannot conceive of such an Ophelia; how can she be such a fool as Craig describes her? “Perhaps she was frightened by a boy on a fence who made faces at her.”

Despite the desultoriness of Craig’s remarks, his are the only opinions about the three we have ever been able to be in full accord with. It is too bad he has nothing to say about Hamlet or any of his problems—though he is unintentionally droll about the Prince’s relations to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. “They were good friends at school,” he says, and then adds inaccurately, “that is why he sent for them, to have the chance of renewing their friendship.” Stanislavski is quick to remind him that it was Claudius who sent for them. “Yes,” counters Craig, “but they were brought up together.” “Lots of people are brought up together! There’s a great difference between being brought up together and being friends.” Cornered, Craig blunders badly: “Quite right. When they found out that Hamlet had not inherited the throne they went over to the King.”

(Craig, by the way, finds Desdemona "rather stupid," but adores Cordelia and Imogen.)]

**HORATIO**

It is Shakespeare's practice in many of his tragedies to include among the persons of the drama a man close to the central character, a man of less magnificence than the hero but also without his shortcomings, a man of less genius but greater balance of character, remarkable in the play's setting for his loyalty, soundness of judgment, and humanity—the individual in the drama who represents the norm of human conduct at its best, a man who is the salt of the earth. In *Romeo and Juliet* he is Benvolio, always bespeaking moderation and calm reflection; in *King Lear* he is Kent, rugged, frank, loving, speaking out when no one else dares speak the truth; in *Antony and Cleopatra* he is Enobarbus, rough soldier, mincing no words, stooping to no flattery when his commander is bent on self-destruction; in *Hamlet* he is Horatio. The dramatic employment of these characters is another demonstration of Shakespeare's cunning as an artist. For it is against the boundless good sense and loving concern of these men that we best gauge the excesses of the more gifted hero.

From the very beginning Horatio's is the voice of sane judgment in the tragedy. In the opening scene, we find Horatio politely skeptical about the existence of ghosts:

> Tush, tush, 'twill not appear.
> I, i, 30

But, though rational, he does not push his rationality, as so many do, to the point of fanaticism. There is no need for Hamlet to assert to him that there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in philosophy, for Horatio is not so foolish as to deny the evidence of his senses even if he cannot account for what they perceive. The Ghost appears, and its appearance puts an end to Horatio's skepticism:

> Before my God, I might not this believe
> Without the sensible and true avouch
> Of mine own eyes.
Reason dictates doubt about such matters; but good sense requires accepting the evidence, even when it defies logic.

Thus, throughout the play, Horatio's quiet voice continues to urge intelligence and moderation upon Hamlet and anyone else he speaks to. It is characteristic of him, when the Queen dreads having to see Ophelia in her madness, that he should remind her that there are more important considerations than her own thinness of skin:

'Twere good she were spoken with, for she
may strew
Dangerous conjectures in ill-breeding minds.
Let her come in.

IV, v, 14-16

He is a man of few words, and his friendship with Hamlet is so perfect that they need none. Whatever Hamlet has to impart, he understands at once. When Hamlet's affection one time starts to pour out in words, Horatio, who needs no reassurance, tries to intercept the flow:

HAM. Horatio, thou art e'en as just a man
As e'er my conversation coped withal.
HOR. O, my dear lord,—

III, ii, 59-61

He never fears to disagree with his friend. He indicates his feeling that Hamlet has been unjust to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern (V, i, 56); when the Prince quarrels with Laertes at Ophelia's grave, it is Horatio who murmurs:

Good my lord, be quiet.

V, i, 288

And when Hamlet, revolted at the insensitiveness of the gravedigger who can sing an idiotic song quite cheerfully while shoveling up a skull that once tenanted a human brain, asks:

Has this fellow no feeling of his business, that he sings at grave-making?

Horatio in a terse line reminds him that since the world cannot dispense with gravemakers, we must expect them in self-defense to harden themselves if they are to endure their necessary work:

Custom hath made it in him a property of easiness.

Hamlet is quick to catch the gentle reproof implied by his friend, and handsomely acknowledges the thoughtlessness of his over-exquisite revulsion:

Tis e'en so. The hand of little employment
hath the daintier sense.

V, i, 73 seq.

Again, in the same scene, when the sight of Yorick's skull generates a train of gloomy thoughts in the Prince:
To what base uses we may return, Horatio! Why may not imagination trace the noble dust of Alexander, till he find it stopping a bung-hole?

Horatio gently warns his friend that there is neither intellectual nor spiritual profit in indulging the mind in morbid speculations of that kind:

'Twere to consider too curiously, to consider so.
V, i, 223 seq.

It is part of wisdom to recognize as insoluble the mysteries of life and death, and not to dissipate the health of the mind in attempting to answer the unanswerable. There are enough questions which we can answer.

At the end of the tragedy, the survival of this perfectly balanced, admirable man among the living forms a significant part of the katharsis. After Hamlet's death, with a man of Horatio's stamp still in the world, we feel some justification in the race's continuing its hard struggle against evil.

ROSENCRANTZ AND GUILDENSTERN

While Hamlet's two old schoolfellows have not the beauty, modesty, humanity, or sensitiveness of Horatio's intelligence, there is no warrant in the play for their being represented, as they constantly are on the stage, as a pair of reptiles.

They were never as close to the Prince as Horatio, but the evidence is that among his friends they have shared the next place in his affections. It is unthinkable that a man as quick and intuitive as Hamlet, who misses no look of the eye or intonation of the voice, would have made friends of two "smirking and bowing, ... assenting, wheedling, flattering" knaves such as Goethe describes them as being, and the world conceives them to be. Such could not have come within a mile of intimacy with Hamlet.

They seem to be the not very profound but agreeable, jolly good fellows we all number among our acquaintances. The three of them must have had many good times together, and it is on the basis of their capacity for drawing him "on to pleasures" that the King has pretended to send for them. We all retain people dear to us because they have been "of so young days brought up" with us, and this was their sort of friendship with Hamlet. He could not be more delighted than he is to see them, when they first arrive (II, ii, 228 seq.). If they were treacherous by nature, Hamlet would have been the first to know it, and the last to greet them with such obvious pleasure. It is in the very nature of their relationship that they should be the bearers of the news of the theatrical world and also herald the arrival of the actors in town.

But Hamlet assuredly turns against them, remorselessly and finally. Before their first interview in the play is ended he, who has welcomed them as best of friends, parts from them as among the most contemptible of his foes. Nothing in the play is more subtly demonstrated than this alteration in his feelings. When Hamlet feels he must distrust them, it is the last in the series of his disenchantments with those he has loved. But that he feels this does not mean that he feels it justly.

As a matter of fact, poor Guildenstern and Rosencrantz are the unlucky victims of circumstance in the play. It is their misfortune to become enmeshed quite innocently in the struggle between Hamlet and the King. Their original intent was honorable. They have been asked, as good friends, to do what they can to divert Hamlet and try to discover what it is that afflicts him, and to find out whether there be anything that Claudius as a loving father can do that lies within his remedy (II, ii, 18). The Queen has seconded this plea of the King, adding that Hamlet has much talked of them.
And sure I am two men there are not living
To whom he more adheres.

The King, of course, means to use them because his own uneasy mind wishes to discover what can be the cause of Hamlet's discontented conduct. But they honestly believe that Claudius is anxious to help their friend—why should they not? When the King and Queen both inform them that Hamlet is "transformed," there is no reason why they should not credit what has been told them or entertain any suspicion of Claudius's motives. Had they been bosom-friends to Hamlet, like Horatio, the case might have been different.

When they meet their friend, they therefore look for signs of his mental aberration, and soon enough find them—since they know nothing of Hamlet's problem or misery. All they can see is that Hamlet's mother and stepfather are so concerned over his well-being that they themselves have been expressly sent for. Yet he speaks of Denmark as a prison—he, the heir-apparent! Their poor friend is in a bad way.

They have, in short, with the best of intentions, undertaken a mission better declined. No one can play the spy on a friend—for no matter what high-minded ends—with honor. It is an office they should have refused.

They have, unluckily for them, simple, unsubtle minds. They cannot comprehend Hamlet's sudden detestation of them—unless it be on the grounds of madness. It is with the sorrow of despised friendship that Rosencrantz overcomes his pride to ask sincerely:

Good, my lord, what is the cause of your distemper? You do surely bar the door upon your own liberty if you deny your griefs to your friend.

The lines cry out the man's sincerity. Hamlet's curt answer evokes another response from his old friend which bespeaks his mystification:

HAM. Sir, I lack advancement.
ROS. How can that be, when you have the voice of the King himself for your succession in Denmark?

III, ii, 350 seq.

Loathing them, Hamlet refuses to be forthright with them again, nor will he afford them an opportunity to prove the honesty of their friendship.

In the end they are put to death without justice. They have no knowledge that the sealed documents they bear to the English King command Hamlet's death. In their eyes the flight to England is a measure for Hamlet's protection after his murder of Polonius. Claudius can have appeared to them only in the light of a patient father whose love for Hamlet, like theirs, has been rejected because of their friend's warped mind. But for Hamlet, rash man, capable of being as monstrously unjust as he is nobly desirous of being honorable, it is enough that they bear the commission for his execution. And so without a tremor he sends them to their death.

It indeed proves catastrophic for these two that they should, though innocent, come

Between the pass and fell incensed points
Of mighty opposites.

V, ii, 61-2

Men of their rather commonplace, if agreeable, stamp are ever in danger of disaster when they make friends with a man of Hamlet's volcanic character. The atmosphere hovering about genius is always charged with lightning.
Luckless pair! Victims of the machinations of Claudius and the rashness of Hamlet, they have since been doomed to be even more the victims of the misunderstanding of critics, directors, and actors!

Notes


15 H. M. Jones, *The King in Hamlet* (Austin, Texas, 1918).


37 J. D. Wilson, *op. cit.*, p. 103.


48 They tell a story, not really amusing, but illustrative of the man of remorselessly logical mind—than whom no one is ever, probably, more unbalanced. Such a one—he was a German, of course—met an American traveler at Cairo, and said, "Young man, I suppose you came the canal through?" "No," said the American.
"Then you came the river down?" "No," said the American. "Then you came the desert across?" "No," said the American. "In that case, my friend," said the German haughtily, "you haff not yet arrived."

49 The 1604 edition of the play assigns these lines to Horatio, the 1623 edition (plainly in error) to the Queen. The advice has the very sound of Horatio's good judgment.

**Baldwin Maxwell (essay date 1964)**


*In the following essay, Maxwell maintains that Gertrude is a passive character, dominated by Claudius until the final moments of the play.*

In an article entitled "The Character of Hamlet's Mother" (*Shakespeare Quarterly*, VIII (1957), 201-206), Miss Carolyn Heilbrun expressed strong disagreement with what had been the generally accepted estimate of Queen Gertrude. Seemingly unaware of the essay by Professor Draper, the Queen's most ardent defender, Miss Heilbrun wrote that "critics, with no exception that I have been able to find, have accepted Hamlet's word 'frailty' as applying to [Gertrude's] whole personality, and have seen in her … a character of which weakness and lack of depth and rigorous intelligence are the entire explanation" (p. 201). She, as had Professor Draper, rejected almost *in toto* the views of such critics as A. C. Bradley, Miss Agnes Mackenzie, H. Granville-Barker, and others who had declared the Queen "weak", "neutral", or "little more than a puppet".

Professor Draper, who thought Gertrude innocent of adultery prior to King Hamlet's death, not only denied her weakness but excused her hasty and incestuous marriage as politically necessary because of a national crisis, "a marriage more of convenience than of love" (p. 121). To him the Queen appeared "dignified, gracious, and resourceful", one who "as a wife, as a mother, as a queen … seems to approximate, if not the Elizabethan ideal, at least the Elizabethan norm". She is, he insisted, "no slave to lust" (pp. 123, 126). It is only on this last point that Miss Heilbrun and Professor Draper markedly disagreed. Although persuaded that Gertrude was innocent of adultery prior to the elder Hamlet's death, Miss Heilbrun argued that her marriage to Claudius was brought about not by a need to settle a national crisis, not by the witchcraft of Claudius' wit, but by lust alone, "the need of sexual passion" in her widowhood. Apart from this passion, the Queen is, Miss Heilbrun believed, a "strong-minded, intelligent, succinct, and … sensible woman", who is, except for her description of Ophelia's death, "concise and pithy in speech, with a talent for seeing the essence of every situation presented before her eyes" (pp. 202-203).

This view of the Queen's character is at such variance with that previously current that one may wish to reexamine her appearances in the play, scene by scene, for light upon the impression Shakespeare sought to create. Little time is needed to do so, for however important the part of the Queen in the story of Hamlet, her role in *the play* is definitely subordinate. She appears in ten of the play's twenty scenes, but in those ten scenes she speaks fewer lines than does Ophelia, who appears in only five; and, unlike Ophelia, the Queen is never the central or dominant figure on the stage. She speaks but one brief aside and never the concluding line of a scene. To be sure, a gifted actress may, by clever stage business and a gracious manner, provide for the role an illusion of importance; but this importance is not supported by the lines she speaks and presumably was not purposed by Shakespeare.

Practically all recent critics have agreed that Gertrude was not only innocent of complicity in the murder of her first husband but wholly unaware of it. That she was, however, guilty of an "o'erhasty [second] marriage", she herself testifies. Nor is it permissible to see that marriage as other than incestuous. The one sin of which the Queen has been accused but of which her guilt may be debatable is that she had been Claudius' mistress while the elder Hamlet was alive.
When in I.ii, the Queen appears on stage for the first time, the audience has heard nothing whatsoever about her. It is prejudiced neither in her favor nor against her. She doubtless enters on the arm of King Claudius, who directs his ingratiating smile towards her during part of the remarkable speech with which the scene opens and from which we learn that he, having shortly before lost a brother, has recently taken to wife his brother's widow. Incest, to be sure—a horrible sin in the eyes of both church and state. But with such consummate skill has the King's speech been phrased that all on the crowded stage—or at least all but one—show neither shock nor disapproval. As a result the audience may naturally assume that the general satisfaction should outweigh the displeasure of one individual, and, in the absence of other details, accept the unusual marriage—at least for the time being—as an act which may well be shown to be both wise and—under the circumstances—permissible.

After the King has explained the present situation and expressed "For all, our thanks", the Queen, apart perhaps from a smile, offers no word of thanks for herself. She remains silent as the King instructs the departing ambassadors and questions Laertes and Polonius on the former's desire to return to France. Gertrude is the last to speak. Upon Hamlet's bitter punning reply to the King,

\[ \text{Not so, my lord. I am too much in the sun,} \]

the Queen makes her first speech—six lines, one of the three longest she speaks in the entire play. She urges Hamlet to "look like a friend on Denmark", to cease mourning for his father since

\[ \text{Thou know'st 'tis common. All that lives must die,}\]
\[ \text{Passing through nature to eternity.} \]

That she misunderstands Hamlet's reply to her cliché, "Ay madam, it is common", is shown by her then asking

\[ \text{If it be,}\]
\[ \text{Why seems it so particular with thee?—} \]

indicative not only that she has herself ceased to mourn her late husband's death but as well that she completely fails to understand her son. After Hamlet's answer, the King, his composure recovered, quickly speaks thirty-one lines, ending with the wish that Hamlet remain at Elsinore. This wish the Queen now seconds in her third and last speech of the scene:

\[ \text{Let not thy mother lose her prayers, Hamlet.}\]
\[ \text{I pray thee stay with us, go not to Wittenberg.} \]

Nine lines later all exeunt save Hamlet.

Such is the Queen's part on her first appearance. She speaks slightly over nine lines in her three speeches—nine lines to the King's ninety-four. Her speeches are short but hardly seem more "concise and pithy" than speech in dramatic verse normally is. Nor do they, composed as they are of a cliché, a misunderstanding, and an echo, encourage the view that she is a "resourceful", "strong-minded" woman, "with a talent for seeing the essence of every situation presented before her eyes". Perhaps, too, her obedient rising at the King's "Madam, come", suggests her domination by him. Such a suggestion is supported by her leaving the stage in three later scenes upon similar words from the King ("Come, Gertrude", IV.i; "Let's follow, Gertrude", IV.vii; "Sweet Gertrude, leave us", III.i) and by her only once speaking as she makes her exit.

Such is our introduction to Queen Gertrude. So much do we know about her when Hamlet later in the scene, in his first soliloquy, expresses his disgust that his mother
A little month, or ere those shoes were old
With which she followed my poor father's
body
Like Niobe, all tears, why she, even she—
O God, a beast that wants discourse of reason
Would have mourned longer—married with
mine uncle,
My father's brother. …
 O, most wicked speed, to post
With such dexterity to incestuous sheets!

That unusual marriage, upon which we had earlier in the scene passed no verdict, we now begin to question.
But Hamlet is only one; the court as a whole had seemed neither to disapprove of the marriage nor to condemn its haste. Yet Hamlet's view, as we are soon to learn, is not peculiar to him, does not spring from thwarted ambition or from an excess of filial affection for his mother. Before we again see Queen Gertrude we are to hear another witness, one eminently qualified to judge her. Three scenes later the Ghost of the dead king is to inform Hamlet that his uncle,

… that incestuous, that adulterate beast,
With witchcraft of his wit, with traitorous
 gifts—
O wicked with and gifts, that have the power
So to seduce!—won to his shameful lust
The will of my most seeming-virtuous
queen. …
But virtue, as it never will be moved,
Though lewdness court it in the shape of
heaven,
So lust, though to a radiant angel linked,
Will sate itself in a celestial bed
And prey on garbage.

Surely we are not now likely to attribute Gertrude's quietness during her earlier appearance either to remorse for her o'erhasty marriage or to an awareness that her former husband was to her present as "Hyperion to a satyr".

But, one may ask, is the Ghost a wholly disinterested witness? Are we to accept everything he relates? Does he really know whereof he speaks? To the accuracy of his knowledge of the present and the future, I must return later, but I think it can hardly be contested that we are to assume that he has, from his vantage point beyond the grave, learned specifically all that concerned his murder. He was asleep when the poison was poured into his ear, and the dumb-show of the play-within-the-play—though that at best is only Hamlet's interpretation of what the Ghost had revealed—does not show him as awakening before he died. Yet, be it noted, the Ghost reveals not only the identity of the murderer and the instant effect which the poison had upon him but, even more remarkable, the very poison used—the "juice of cursed hebona". Further, the King's reaction to the play-within-the-play confirms the Ghost's account of the murder in every detail. Must we not assume, therefore, that every other revelation of the past which the Ghost gives is equally accurate: that Claudius,

With witchcraft of his wit, with traitorous
 gifts
… won to his shameful lust
The will of [the] most seeming-virtuous queen.

Miss Heilbrun, who thinks Gertrude had not been Claudius' mistress, denies that Claudius had won her by the witchcraft of his wit. The real reason Gertrude had entered upon her hasty second marriage, Miss Heilbrun claimed, was given by the Ghost later in the same speech:

But virtue, as it never will be moved,
Though lewdness court it in the shape of heaven,
So lust, though to a radiant angel linked,
Will sate itself in a celestial bed
And prey on garbage.

But if we accept as true one part of the Ghost's speech, must we not accept the other also? And do not the last three lines quoted above suggest a violation of the marriage vows? That they were intended to do so is evidenced by the Ghost's having protested in the same speech, in lines immediately preceding, that his

… love was of that dignity
That it went hand in hand even with the vow
I made to her in marriage;

and that Hamlet understood the Ghost's words as indicating Gertrude's adultery is shown by his charging her in the Closet Scene with

Such an act
That blurs the grace and blush of modesty,
… makes marriage vows
As false as dicers' oaths.

So much, then, do we learn of Gertrude in Act I. On these lines must be based the original impression Shakespeare wished to give us. It is interesting and, I suspect, significant that a very large part of what we have so far learned of Gertrude and Claudius represents modification or elaboration by Shakespeare of what is found in Belleforest's account. There, of course, Gertrude is neither weak nor neutral. Although she is not said to have participated in planning the murder of her husband, she was an accomplice after the murder, for she did not deny her lover's claim that it was in defence of her that he had slain his brother. Where, asked Belleforest, would one find "a more wicked and bold woman?" Such a question would never be asked by one writing of the Gertrude of the play. Her character Shakespeare has decidedly softened, even though in the play she appears guilty on every count cited by Belleforest except that of giving support to a false account of her husband's slaying. Shakespeare has softened her character not only by making her ignorant of the murder of her husband but by elaborating, in a way most effective upon the stage, that artful craft of Claudius as reported in Belleforest's account. There the murderer "covered his boldnesse and wicked practise with so great subtiltie and policie, and under the vaile of meere simplicitie … that his sinne found excuse among the common people, and of the nobilitie was esteemed for justice". Claudius' persuasive cunning is further suggested by Belleforest's observing that Gertrude, "as soone as she once gave eare to [her husband's brother], forgot both the ranke she helde … and the dutie of an honest wife". To portray this smooth persuasiveness and subtle craft the dramatist introduced a brilliant dramatic touch for which there is no suggestion in Belleforest—the ingratiating smiling which leads Hamlet to declare Claudius a "smiling damned villain", and to cry out:

My tables—meet it is I set it down
That one may smile, and smile, and be a
villain.
At least I am sure it may be so in Denmark.

So much for Act I. The Queen next appears in II.ii. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern have been summoned to spy upon Hamlet, and Gertrude's first two speeches merely echo in fewer words the welcome given them by the King. With one exception her five remaining speeches in this scene are of one line or less, most of them designed to break and give a semblance of dialogue to Polonius' artful narration. The one exception is a speech of two lines in reply to the King's reporting to her that Polonius claims to have found

The head and source of all your son's
distemper.

The Queen replies:

I doubt it is no other but the main,
His father's death, and our o'erhasty marriage.

This speech, which some critics (mistakenly, I think) have seen as evidence that the Queen's conscience is already troubled, Miss Heilbrun pronounced "concise, remarkably to the point, and not a little courageous" (p. 203). One could the more readily agree with her had Gertrude omitted the word "o'erhasty". When the King first announced his marriage to his brother's widow, he passed quickly on to important affairs of state, but since then we have heard the incestuous nature of that marriage emphasized by both Hamlet and the Ghost. Are we to assume from her mentioning only the hastiness of their marriage—a censurable indiscretion perhaps but no mortal sin—that Gertrude failed to realize that her marriage to Claudius, no matter when performed, must bear the graver stain of incest? As she is at the time alone with the King, I think we must so assume. She hardly reveals here "a talent for seeing the essence of every situation presented before her eyes". But how can she have been so blind to the true nature of her marriage? The only explanation would seem to be that she is blinded by the traitorous gifts of Claudius, by the witchcraft of his wit. She thinks as he directs, acts as he wishes.

The next scene in which the Queen appears is III.ii—the play scene. Here she is on stage for 187 lines and speaks a total of two and one half lines. When to her first speech, "Come hither, my dear Hamlet, sit by me", Hamlet replies that he prefers to sit by Ophelia, the Queen is silent until 127 lines later, when, to emphasize the purport of such lines as "None wed the second but who killed the first", Hamlet asks, "Madam, how like you this play?" She answers simply, "The lady doth protest too much, methinks"—a speech which need not suggest stupidity, for she, unlike us, has not heard the ghost and knows not what is in Hamlet's mind; but unless we are to think of her as an artful villainess indeed, the simplicity of her reply is enough to urge her complete innocence of any participation in the murder. She now follows the play intently, saying nothing more until, when the frightened King rises, she anxiously enquires "How fares my lord?" In this scene then, aside from the first clear indication that Gertrude has been no accomplice in the murder, we see in her just what we see in her in other scenes—her love for her son, her devoted concern for Claudius, and her remarkable quietness, with long periods of silence.

It is when she next appears, in III.iv—the so-called Closet Scene—that the Queen has her biggest part. The scene opens with Polonius' hiding himself behind the arras that he may overhear the interview between mother and son—an interview in which the Queen has promised to "be round with him" in the hope of dis-covering the cause of Hamlet's strange behavior. The scheme had been conceived by Polonius and suggested to Claudius in II.ii, when Gertrude was not on stage. We do not witness the King's persuading the Queen to assist in this eavesdropping upon her son, but that she had received specific instructions on how the interview should be conducted is brought out in her conversation with Polonius before Hamlet enters:
Polonius: 'A will come straight. Look you lay home to him. Tell him his pranks have been too broad to bear with, And that your grace hath screened and stood between Much heat and him. I'll silence me even here. Pray you be round with him. …

Queen: I'll warrant you; fear me not.

The Queen had consented to these "lawful espials", as she had consented earlier when Ophelia had been used as a decoy, probably both because she is hopeful that such a scheme may indeed unearth the secret of Hamlet's strange behavior and because the stronger Claudius is able always to dominate her will and persuade her to serve his purpose. That this second explanation is sound is, I believe, shown by a departure which Shakespeare here makes from the account of the Closet Scene as related by Belleforest. In Belleforest the King and his councillor, without taking the Queen into their confidence, arrange for the councillor to secrete himself where he may overhear mother and son; the Queen not only has no part in planning the interview, but does not suspect the presence of the eavesdropper until he is discovered by the crafty and suspicious Hamlet's beating his arms upon the hangings. By this change in the Queen's part from that of an unwitting participant to that of an active accomplice Shakespeare seems to emphasize the extent to which Claudius dominates her and uses her as his tool.

The Queen begins the closet interview with bluster and some confidence. She has apparently been well briefed as to what she shall say. But when Hamlet proves recalcitrant, when in an ugly mood he assumes the offensive and by so doing throws her out of the part she has been coached to play, she is for a brief moment bold and stubborn. "What have I done?" she cries:

What have I done, that thou dar'st wag thy tongue 
In noise so rude against me?

But as Hamlet becomes more specific in his charges, Gertrude has neither the strength nor the inclination to bluster it further. She appears, indeed, stricken in con-science:

O Hamlet, speak no more, 
Thou turn'st mine eyes into my very soul, 
And there I see such black and grainèd spots 
As will not leave their tinct.

And again,

O Hamlet, thou hast cleft my heart in twain.

Although in this scene the Queen has more speeches and more lines than she has in any other scene, she is throughout overshadowed by Hamlet. In the same number of speeches he speaks four times as many lines as does she. Of her twenty-four speeches, thirteen—more than half—are one line or less, and four others are less than two lines.

Some of her speeches invite comment. Miss Mackenzie has noted that Gertrude sees her penitence not as the consequence of her own actions but rather as a result of Hamlet's harsh words to her:
Second, it is important to note that the question which she, contrite, puzzled, and helpless, addresses to Hamlet as he prepares to leave, "What shall I do?", illustrates the lack of initiative and independence which mark her throughout. Too weak to determine any procedure for herself, she must rely upon others for guidance in every action.

More puzzling is the Queen's last speech in the scene—a reply to Hamlet's

I must to England, you know that?
Ger. Alack,
I had forgot. 'Tis so concluded on.

No one has ever questioned Gertrude's devotion to her son, although in urging him earlier to "stay with us, go not to Wittenberg", she may have spoken the instructions of Claudius as well as her motherly affection. It is impossible that by "I had forgot" she could have meant other than that the many unhappy events of the evening had crowded out of her mind the realization that Hamlet was to be sent to England. But the King's decision that he be sent away she had apparently accepted without protest as one accustomed to accepting without question what others decide for her.

In Belleforest's account the Queen, although she never appears after the Closet Scene, is definitely and actively an ally of her son, working in his absence to facilitate his revenge. In Shakespeare, although she protests to Hamlet:

Be thou assured, if words be made of breath,
And breath of life, I have no life to breathe
What thou hast said to me,

and although she keeps her promise, the Queen utters not one word in condemnation of the crimes of Claudius which Hamlet has revealed to her, and indeed in the very next scene greets him as "mine own lord". Never is there an indication in the later scenes that her attitude toward Claudius or her relations with him have been altered by what Hamlet has told her. True it is that immediately following the Closet Scene she apparently lies to the King in an effort to protect her son. Although Hamlet has confessed to her that he is "not in madness, But mad in craft", she assures the King that Hamlet is

Mad as the sea and wind when both contend
Which is the mightier. In his lawless fit,
Behind the arras hearing something stir,
Whips out his rapier, cries 'A rat, a rat!'
And in this brainish apprehension kills
The unseen good old man.

And she reports that Hamlet has gone

To draw apart the body he hath killed;
O'er whom his very madness, like some ore
Among a mineral of metals base,
Shows itself pure. 'A weeps for what is done.

One need have little hesitation in concluding that Gertrude is here lying in an effort to render Hamlet's act less responsible and therefore more pardonable. The Queen has not seen Hamlet since the audience witnessed their
parting, and Hamlet was surely not weeping then. But though the Queen lies to help her son, it is important to add in any assay of her character that it was not upon her own initiative that she does so. Here no more than earlier is she acting independently. Incapable of herself determining any course of action, she is merely following the course which Hamlet had suggested to her. To her helpless "What shall I do?" Hamlet had replied:

Not this, by no means, that I bid you do:
Let the bloat King …
Make you to ravel all this matter out,
That I essentially am not in madness,
But mad in craft. 'Twere good you let him
know,
For who that's but a queen, fair, sober, wise,
Would from a paddock, from a bat, a gib,
Such dear concernings hide? Who would do
so?
No, in despite of sense and secrecy,
Unpeg the basket on the house's top,
Let the birds fly, and like the famous ape,
To try conclusions, in the basket creep
And break your own neck down.

Such is Hamlet's sarcastic direction in answer to the Queen's uncertain "What shall I do?" She must decide upon some course immediately, for the King is impatiently awaiting a report of the interview. Accordingly she follows Hamlet's direction; she lies to keep his secret, perhaps because maternal love demands that she protect him, but also because, accustomed to having others make all important decisions for her, she is incapable of substituting for Hamlet's direction any procedure of her own.

In Belleforest, as has been said, the Queen never appears after the account of the interview in her closet. Although we learn later that she had kept her promise to assist her son in his revenge upon her second husband by fashioning, during her son's absence in England, the means of his revenge, we are told nothing of her later life—how she conducted herself in her relations with the King or how she died. In Shakespeare's play, however, she figures in five later scenes—exactly half of the total number in which she appears. Her part in these scenes, having no basis in the older accounts, must have been added either by Shakespeare or by the author of an earlier lost play. The first of these scenes is that just mentioned—that in which she reports to the King. In only one of them, IV.v, her next appearance, does she reveal any remorse or any sense of guilt; and before the end of that scene her sense of guilt seems completely erased by a determination to follow the easier way, to accept the status quo, to continue a way of life she had found pleasant.

IV.v opens with her refusal to admit the mad Ophelia to her presence—a refusal due perhaps to a characteristic desire to escape any distressing situation, or perhaps to her already being burdened with grief and remorse. When Ophelia enters, Gertrude is sympathetic but quite inarticulate. Her three speeches to Ophelia are—in full:

1. How now, Ophelia?
2. Alas, sweet lady, what imports this song?
3. Nay, but Ophelia—

Then, upon the King's welcome entry, with "Alas, look here, my lord", the Queen turns the unpleasant situation over to him and retires into silence until after Ophelia has departed. Her unwillingness to see Ophelia and her inability to express any words of comfort or sympathy may, as I have said, be due in part to her being,
at the moment, too heavily oppressed by her own griefs and her own sense of guilt. As Ophelia enters, Gertrude offers in an aside the only admission of guilt she makes after the Closet Scene:

To my sick soul (as sin's true nature is)
Each toy seems prologue to some great amiss.
So full of artless jealousy is guilt,
It spills itself in fearing to be spilt.

Before the end of the scene, however, the Queen is to cry out upon Laertes' mob threatening the King:

How cheerfully on the false trail they cry!
O, this is counter, you false Danish dogs!

and, in order to save Claudius, is first to seize Laertes' arm and then to assure him that it was not Claudius who had caused the death of his father. Having, perhaps unconsciously, directed Laertes' hatred towards Hamlet, she offers no fuller explanation and is silent for the remaining ninety lines of the scene. Her extended silence here is certainly not indicative of remorse for her earlier acts; it has been characteristic of her throughout the play. In this scene she reveals perhaps, as she reveals nowhere else in the play, the sensual side of her love for Claudius. Before the scene is half over her sense of guilt has been crowded out of her mind. She shows no repentance. Unlike the Queen in Belleforest or the Queen in the pirated first quarto, she has not aligned herself on the side of her son. Now that he has gone, she finds it easier simply to continue the life she had led before he had made his dreadful revelation. Had Hamlet remained in Denmark, had he been at hand to remind her of her weakness and to answer whenever necessary her question "What shall I do?" it is possible that her sense of guilt might have persisted, that she might even have repented and changed her way of life. But without initiative and independence, she can in Hamlet's absence only drift with the current.

Only twice, then, does Gertrude reveal the least remorse—in the latter part of the Closet Scene and in the single aside as she awaits the entrance of the mad Ophelia. From that time on, as earlier in the play, her actions and speeches evince no prick of conscience although the Ghost, in his instructions to Hamlet in I.v, had implied that she was to suffer the consequence of her sins. "… Howsomever thou pursues this act", the Ghost had told his son,

Taint not thy mind, nor let thy soul contrive
Against thy mother aught. Leave her to heaven
And to those thorns that in her bosom lodge
To prick and sting her. …

The Ghost is, as I have noted, most accurately informed of the past. That ghosts were often well informed of the future is indicated by Horatio's beseeching the Ghost to speak

If thou art privy to thy country's fate,
Which happily foreknowing may avoid.

But that ghosts might be ignorant of the future and even uncomprehending of the present is shown in The Spanish Tragedy by the repeated questioning by the Ghost of Andrea as he watches the play unfold. The Ghost of King Hamlet clearly expects his son to sweep to a swift revenge; he does not understand the delay; nor surely did he expect such complete catastrophe to engulf the entire royal family. In spite of his exact knowledge of the past, therefore, it would appear that the Ghost's knowledge of the immediate present and of the future was far too limited to warrant our acceptance as testimony of Gertrude's remorse his mention of
… those thorns that in her bosom lodge
To prick and sting her. …

Indeed, if one may, without confusing life and art, delve into the past of characters in a drama, it may be said that King Hamlet had ever but slenderly known his wife. Created in an heroic mould, he understood not the mortal frailties which might lead his "most seeming-virtuous queen"

   to decline
Upon a wretch whose natural gifts were poor
To those of [his].

Just as he had, before learning of her transgressions, been deceived by his wife's seeming-virtue, so, after learning of them, he expected her to be tortured by the stings of conscience. He was apparently twice deceived.

But to continue tracing the Queen's part in the play. She appears, of course, in all of the last three scenes. She enters late in IV.vii, after the King and Laertes have completed their plans for bringing about Hamlet's death, and in her longest speech in the play announces Ophelia's drowning. Her purpose here, however, is that of a messenger; her speech throws little light on her character—and certainly reveals no awareness of her own responsibility for the young girl's death.

In V.i, the scene in the graveyard, the Queen first mentions in a single speech her thwarted hope that Ophelia might have been Hamlet's bride, and then, as Hamlet and Laertes struggle in the grave, she, in her remaining speeches, follows the lead of Claudius:

   King: Pluck them asunder.
   Queen: Hamlet, Hamlet!
   King: O, he is mad, Laertes.
   Queen: For love of God, forbear him.

Then:

   This is mere madness;
   And thus a while the fit will work on him.
   Anon as patient as the female dove …
   His silence will sit drooping.

The Queen, of course, does not know of the treachery plotted by Claudius and Laertes. She must by these speeches have sought to end the struggle in the grave and to lessen Laertes' resentment at Hamlet's behavior, but it is noticeable—and I think characteristic—that in each of her speeches she echoes or enlarges upon ideas just expressed by Claudius.

In V.ii, the concluding scene of the play, the Queen for the first time, I believe, acts with initiative and speaks for herself. Just before the court enters to watch the fencing match, an unnamed lord brings a message to Hamlet: "The Queen desires you to use some gentle entertainment to Laertes before you fall to play". As the effect of this message would be to lessen any suspicions of foul play, to encourage Hamlet's acceptance of the match as a "brother's wager frankly playfed!", one is tempted to suggest that the Queen's message may have originated with the King, that here as earlier the Queen is being used to further the plan of another. (It will be remembered that immediately after the play-within-the-play Polonius brought Hamlet word that "the Queen would speak with you, and presently" (III.ii. 359), but, as previously noted, the idea of the interview was not the Queen's. It had originated with Polonius, and the King, to whom he suggested it (III.i. 182ff.), had
off-stage persuaded the Queen to cooperate.) However, in the absence of any statement to the contrary, I
presume we must accept the message as the lord delivers it, as the Queen's own suggestion. And in some
respects it is a thoroughly characteristic suggestion, revealing as it does her recurring hope that in spite of all
that had gone before, she and others, without being required to pay the price of penitence, may go on enjoying
the present by simply refusing to remember the past.

During the closing scene the Queen is silent for the first sixty-one lines she is on stage. She then within a
space of twenty-four lines has four speeches, totaling six pentameter lines. She refers to Hamlet's scantness of
breath and offers her napkin to mop his brow. Then, for the first time in the play escaping the dominance of
Claudius, she acts independently and counter to his expressed wish—and her crossing him means her death.

Queen: … The queen carouses to thy
fortune, Hamlet.
King: Gertrude, do not drink.
Queen: I will, my lord; I pray you pardon me.

And so she drinks from the poisoned cup. I can see no justification whatsoever for the view of a critic who
sought to defend the Queen's character by suggesting that she, suspecting the wine to be poisoned, drank it to
protect Hamlet and to atone for the wrongs and sins of her past. Others, like the author of the New Exegesis of
Shakespeare (1859), have remarked that her death was "as exquisitely negative as possible—that is, by
poison, from her own hand, in a VINOUS BEVERIDGE [sic], and THROUGH MISTAKE." But however
negative her death, it was, ironically, the result of her one act of independence. And her final speech, in
answer to the King's hasty explanation, "She sounds to see them bleed":

No, no, the drink, the drink! O my dear
Hamlet!
The drink, the drink! I am poisoned—

Here for the first time the Queen seems to understand the essence of the situation. Only in this last speech
does she recognize or admit to herself the villainy of her second husband. Only here—long after her
counterpart in Belleforest had done so—does she take her position beside her son and against the King.

Notes

1 John W. Draper, "Queen Gertrude", The Hamlet of Shakespeare's Audience (Durham: Duke University

2 To Bradley "The Queen was not a bad-hearted woman. … But she had a soft animal nature, and was very
dull and very shallow. She loved to be happy. … The belief at the bottom of her heart was that the world is a
place constructed simply that people may be happy in it in a good-humoured sensual fashion" (Shakespearian

Miss Mackenzie follows Bradley but is more severe. To her Gertrude is "simply … stupid, coarse, ["cheap"]
and shallow". "She has", continued Miss Mackenzie, "the qualities of a pleasant animal—docility, kindliness,
affection for her offspring, a courage in defence of her mate. She would have made a very lovable cat or dog"

Granville-Barker was more kind. He saw Gertrude as "a woman who does not mature, who clings to her youth
and all that belongs to it. … She is drawn for us with unemphatic strokes, and she has but a passive part in the
play's action. She moves throughout in Claudius' shadow; he holds her as he had won her, by the witchcraft of
C. P. Aichinger (essay date 1968)


[Here, Aichinger remarks that Hamlet's character is not afflicted by a tragic flaw, as many commentators have contended, but rather faces a dilemma similar to those posed in the twentieth-century Theater of the Absurd.]

It seems that the underlying concept of almost all Hamlet criticism is that Hamlet suffers from a tragic flaw in his character—something akin to Oedipus' quick temper, Othello's jealousy, or Lear's senile vanity, which causes him to make the classic "mistake in judgment" that will lead to his downfall. It is true that one is able to detect such a flaw in the characters of many of Shakespeare's tragic heroes, but the fact that an idea is generally applicable should not lead us into the mistake of trying to apply it universally in cases where it manifestly does not fit. Hamlet appears to be one of these cases.

A consistent interpretation of Hamlet's actions can be made by examining the play in the light of the modern Theatre of the Absurd. The psychiatrists point out that the word "schizophrenia" is commonly misunderstood—to most people it has connotations of "split personality", while in actual fact the popular term "split personality" refers to a form of amnesia. Schizophrenia occurs when the individual finds himself incapable of communicating with the rest of society. It refers to the breakdown, for psychological reasons, of communications between the individual and the group. The Theatre of the Absurd is a reflection of social schizophrenia on a large scale. The Absurd, in the words of Eugène Ionesco, is the situation in which man finds himself "devoid of purpose … Cut off from his religious, metaphysical and transcendental roots, man is lost; All his action becomes senseless, absurd, useless". Although a literary movement specifically dedicated to the treatment of this aspect of the human condition has only appeared in the twentieth century, there is no reason to suppose that the condition is peculiar to this century. Shakespeare was just as likely to observe the phenomenon in the sixteenth century, and to deal with it in the character of Hamlet, as Samuel Beckett was to observe it and deal with it in the characters of Didi and Gogo, in the twentieth.

If Hamlet is not the classic "flawed hero", how can his character be defined, and what are the factors which contribute to his downfall? In the first place, the evidence of the play seems to indicate that Hamlet is not a weak character, but a strong one. His "problem" is that he combines extreme sensitivity and perceptiveness with a degree of moral strength which enables him, or forces him, to act morally in an essentially immoral world. Hamlet is the picture of a humane man in a harsh world, a moral man in an immoral world, a sensitive man in a cruel society. Hamlet delays killing the king for the simple reason that killing a human being in cold blood is a morally repulsive action. The society in which he lives, in urging him to carry out the most primitive of all acts—revenge—provides the force against which his nature instinctively reacts, thereby placing him in a situation analogous to that of the characters in the Theatre of the Absurd.

Before going on to establish the evil nature of the society in which Hamlet lives, it is necessary to establish that Hamlet really has a strong moral character. On the negative side, it is easy enough to show that Hamlet is not a coward, that he does not suffer from any weakness of will or inability to act, that he does not lack the ability to think clearly, and that he does not suffer (with one clearcut exception) from any mental disorder. Hamlet does have a moment of madness, but mental illness is not a permanent factor in his makeup.
On the positive side, there are a multitude of factors pointing to the strength of Hamlet's character. Throughout the play, he displays a gentility and moral sense superior to that of any other person. His treatment of Horatio and the players is democratic and humane.

With his mother, even in his moment of greatest revulsion at her actions, he limits himself to "speaking daggers" to her even though he is sufficiently over-wrought to use them on another, less fortunate person. His attempts to deal frankly with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, even after he suspects their duplicity, are almost pathetic in their sincerity. With Laertes, in the last moments before their duel, he is nobility and generosity incarnate; a fact which Shakespeare underlines by contrasting Hamlet's generosity with Laertes' oafishness and equivocation.

In his relationships with these most intimate of his associates, Hamlet offers open friendship, honorable treatment, and unfailing courtesy, until the enmity or immorality of the individual forces him reluctantly to change his approach. He is a man hoping always to find goodness predominant in human nature. The revulsion produced in him by the immoral conduct of certain individuals is one of the tragic elements of the play. But there is an infinitely more destructive factor which wears down his resistance and, at one point (the killing of Polonius), causes him to act as savagely as his fellows. This factor is his inability to verbalize his objection to the social code, to define exactly what it is that revolts him, while remaining under constant pressure (even from himself) to carry out the act of revenge. His refusal to kill the king involves him in all the metaphysical anguish of a man out of touch with his fellows; he thus finds himself in a position which is essentially Absurd.

It seems that to understand the play's significance in the modern day, one must take as a basic premise that society is one of the chief protagonists; a protagonist more pervasive, subtle and insidious in its evil effects than any poor mortal like Claudius could possibly be. The magnitude of the struggle in Hamlet and the impact of the tragedy are derived from the fact that, while Hamlet is morally revolted by the conduct of most of his fellow creatures and by the act which society as a whole urges him to commit, he himself remains a product of that society. That is to say, the effort to withstand its influence does not merely involve refusing to carry out an act of revenge, however dishonoring and shameful such a refusal might be. It involves far more than that. To succeed in his effort, Hamlet must consciously subdue that element of society which is part of his own personality, and which is reflected even in Horatio's philosophic complacency as well as in Gertrude's casual sensuality. The effort to maintain his moral position involves Hamlet in a rejection of the social order which is part of the warp and woof of his very character, without providing him with an alternative moral position.

Hamlet's rejection of the moral standards of his society is crystallized by the events which follow his father's death. The shock of that event, followed by young Hamlet's loss of the election to the throne, Gertrude's casual acceptance of her husband's death, and her "o'er hasty marriage", serve to heighten his awareness of the condition of society. The general state of immorality within the royal household, as exemplified by Claudius' drunkenness and Laertes' anxiety to return to the fleshpots of Paris, is a microcosmic glimpse of the world at large in which states waste their time and substance in bloody wars over patches of ground that have "no profit but in the name".

But it is not mere revulsion at the overt malignancy of individuals or states that essentially characterizes Hamlet's reaction. After all, his ability to define their wickedness should imply that he could keep himself aloof from such conduct. They could go their way and he his. The problem, and the tragedy, stems from the fact that this society and these individuals make a specific demand upon him which he cannot ignore. If he were asked to participate in some relatively simple act of evil—treason, debauchery, betrayal of a friend—the refusal would be a simple matter; and it would be simple because it would be a refusal of an action that was accepted as evil within the context of society, i.e., it would involve merely a denial of temptation. The crux of the whole tragedy, however, is that Hamlet is urged to commit the most evil of all acts—revenge—while being denied any moral basis for his delay. The society in which he lives accepts the concept of revenge as
perfectly moral, just as every society accepts as perfectly moral some concept that is essentially evil. Hamlet himself is not even capable of defining his opposition to the concept. At best, he is instinctively and subconsciously aware of its evil nature, but the great boon of being able to see clearly what he is struggling against is denied him, not only because he is steeped in the tradition of a society that glorifies such an act, but also because the demand for action was imposed upon him by the person he revered most of all—his father. The most violent efforts of his conscious or "socially-conditioned" nature to bring him to act are really efforts which go against his true nature. Thus, his delay seems to him to be moral cowardice, and he really is puzzled by the question: "I do not know / Why yet I live to say 'This things' to do'" (IV, iv, 43-4).

The fact that Hamlet is not able to formulate his problem in words does not diminish its urgency in any way. Nor does it lessen the pressure upon him. He is in the most desperate of situations—a man under growing internal and external pressure from a source which he is scarcely capable of defining. It is little wonder that, tempted almost beyond his endurance, he cries: "There is nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it so". When he utters these words he has come very close to accepting the savage standards of his society. His resistance to temptation, however, is bought at a terrible price, since it is the cause of the temporary insanity which afflicts him in Act III when he gratuitously insults Ophelia and kills her father. There is plenty of evidence to support the contention that Hamlet's harsh treatment of Ophelia and the killing of Polonius (the two most evident contradictions of the claim that Hamlet is really a man of great moral strength) result from a temporary insanity. These events occur at the times when Hamlet is under the severest emotional stress. The significance of the "Mousetrap" scene is not that its success will ease the execution of Hamlet's apparent duty; but that its proof of Claudius' guilt will close the last avenue by which Hamlet could have avoided the demands of society. It is his own doom that Hamlet waits to see revealed, not that of the king. In such circumstances, and considering the strain he has suffered up to that point, it is not hard to understand his behaviour both here and in his mother's chamber.

What proof is there that Hamlet's treatment of Ophelia and his killing of Polonius are acts of real insanity? Firstly, every bit of evidence in the play supports the contention that Hamlet is normally the soul of courtesy. For him to take suddenly and gratuitously to insulting women, particularly the one he loves, would be incongruous beyond imagining. Similarly, in the killing of Polonius his madness is readily apparent. His actions and his expression when he enters his mother's room are enough to cause her to panic and cry out for help, an action which mothers normally do not resort to during interviews with their sons. Secondly, there is the matter of his seeing the Ghost again. If the Ghost revealed itself, or was unable to conceal itself, from the sight of everyone on the ramparts, regardless of rank, why or how should it conceal itself from the sight of its former wife? The Ghost, in this instance, must definitely be a hallucination and definite proof of Hamlet's madness. Finally, there is the strongest proof of all that Hamlet was mad: he admits it himself. As E. E. Stoll has pointed out, the Elizabethan audience was even less familiar with the jargon of psychoanalysis than is the modern audience. As he so rightly claims, whenever the action takes a turn that requires the least psychological knowledge, Shakespeare is careful to have a commentator explain the situation.2 Thus, when Hamlet says to Laertes in Act V:

\[
\text{… you must needs have heard, how I am punished} \\
\text{With sore distraction. What I have done,} \\
\text{That might your nature, honour and exception} \\
\text{Roughly awake, I here proclaim was madness.} \\
\text{(V, ii, 239-42)}
\]

we would do well to believe him. Nor is there any reason for supposing that Hamlet would seek to excuse his actions on the grounds of his feigned madness. Such baseness would be completely incongruous with his character and with the mood in which he seeks Laertes' forgiveness.
The deaths of Polonius and Ophelia are the lowest points in the abyss of madness which Hamlet must traverse; but he survives these experiences and, in doing so, he ceases to be hag-ridden by the spectre of revenge. The tone and mood of Act V are radically different from those of the preceding acts, and the essence of the difference is that Hamlet has resolved the problem which harried him, at one point, beyond the bounds of sanity. From this point onward, the battle he fights is his own, not his father's.

In order to understand the shift in Hamlet's point of view in Act V, it is important to make the distinction between revenge and self-defence. Revenge was the morally revolting deed, condoned and even applauded by the society in which he lived, which he could not bring himself to commit. His battle throughout the play is to withstand the forces urging him to commit this action. This does not suggest, however, that he is a sort of Pollyanna who shrinks from any form of killing. Hamlet is the child of his time when it comes to self-defence, and the man who balks at the concept of revenge acts swiftly and surely to eliminate those individuals—Rosencrantz, Guildenstern and Claudius—who have shown themselves to be his personal enemies.

It is possible to see a threat of revenge against the king in Hamlet's speech:

Does it not, think'st thee, stand me now
upon—
He that hath kill'd my king and whored my mother,
Popp'd in between the election and my hopes,
Thrown out his angle for my proper life,
And with such cozenage—is't not perfect conscience,
To quit him with this arm? and is't not to be damn'd,
To let this canker of our nature come
In further evil?
(V, ii, 63-70)

but then Hamlet has ranted on about revenge throughout the play ("Now could I drink hot blood", etc.) without actually carrying out his threats. The real significance of the lines just quoted seems to be that they are a summary of the offences against Hamlet's family and himself which bode very ill for the future unless Hamlet can rid himself, and incidentally the state, of this menace. Finally, of course, there is the fact that Hamlet makes no mention of revenge when he kills Claudius, however appropriate and satisfying such mention might be. It cannot be seriously doubted that at this moment Hamlet is striking in his own behalf. His fear that his previous delays might be misinterpreted is the basis for his dying request to Horatio, the man who understood him best and who would be most likely to see the true reasons for his actions. After all, if he had acted from a motive of revenge, he would not have needed the services of an apologist. Everyone would recognize and applaud a revenge. What they would not recognize and what would require some explanation, is the idea that a man could reject the concept of revenge as a basis for action.

It seems logical, then, to believe that Hamlet's problem differs in degree, but not in kind, from the dilemma of modern man. On the one hand, there is no valid reason for taking the "tragic flaw" concept as the sole basis for tragedy; on the other hand, taking the point of view that Hamlet is forced into a schizophrenic isolation from society provides a consistent (and no less tragic) explanation of his actions. Certainly, the revenge motif is not sufficient foundation for the universal and lasting significance that the play holds for its audiences. The grisly excesses of The Spanish Tragedy and The Jew of Malta have long since relinquished their hold upon humanity; but Hamlet, the tragedy of a man who finds himself in a morally absurd situation, lives on, ever fresh and vital.
The Absurdity of Hamlet's situation is the basis for the play's universal and enduring appeal. One of the truly tragic situations is that in which man's moral nature is faced with an unavoidable, immoral choice, and in which the essential immorality is condoned by society. In *Hamlet*, Shakespeare has heightened the situation by making the choice one which involves life and death. Whether or not to kill a man is the supreme moral question—far more real, more immediate, than any philosophical or theological speculation. Hence Hamlet's remark to Horatio: "There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio / Than are dreamt of in your philosophy" (I, v, 166-7). His agonizing struggle to resist society's demands that he kill Claudius is thus the paradigm of the lesser moral decisions which every man is forced to take from time to time. The keynote of Hamlet's problem is voiced early in the play, in Polonius' unwittingly apposite saw: "To thine own self be true". Hamlet tries to be true to what he *thinks* should be his real nature, thereby placing himself in a situation that is basically Absurd, and setting afoot the train of events leading to the tragedy.

Notes


James L. Calderwood (essay date 1978)


*[In the following essay, Calderwood examines structure and the language of naming in Hamlet in order to arrive at an assessment of Hamlet's character—forged throughout the play as a conjoinment of the concrete and the universal.]*

Off the coast of Wales to the northwest of Caernarvonshire is the island of Anglesey, which the Romans (and Milton in "Lycidas") called Mona, and on the landward side of this island is a town with the name of Llanfairpwllgwyngyllgogerychwyrndrobwilllantysiliogogogoch. As one would expect, it means "The church of St. Mary on the pool of the white hazel by the raging whirlpool near the church of St. Tysilio of the Red Cave." One wonders why the local folk, who delight in baffling visitors with the pronunciation, should have burdened themselves originally with such a backpack of sound. My first guess imputed to the name-givers a kind of scientific or cartographic motive. Wanting to get the town exactly situated, they invented a name embodying a set of landmarks, a name as much like a map as possible. Standing by the pool with the white hazel and the raging whirlpool and the church of St. Tysilio and a red cave, and consulting the name, which you would unfurl like a scroll, you would know that you were indeed at the right place.

Thus the name is a wonderful particularizer, announcing, "This place here and nowhere else." But if the name issued from a cartographic impulse, it is too self-referential to serve as a map. In fact, it is a closed circle of designation: you can locate not merely the church of St. Mary but any of the defining terms simply by turning the name this way or that. Thus "The church of St. Tysilio of the Red Cave near the raging whirlpool by the pool of the white hazel near the church of St. Mary," and so on. The name is a self-enclosed system of mutually defined places, much like a dictionary that sends us from one term to another—from, say, "being" to "actuality" to "existence" and back to "being"—in order to understand the first word looked up. Unless you already knew the location of Llanfair P. G., as the local post office now calls it, you could not find it by means of its name. Its admirable particularity deprives it of meaning by disconnecting it from frames of geographical reference.
If we look at the flyleaf of Stephen Dedalus's geography book, we shall see that the cartographic spirit works with greater rigor in Ireland than in Anglesey:

Stephen Dedalus  
Class of Elements  
Clongowes Wood College  
Sallins  
County Kildare  
Ireland  
Europe  
The World  
The Universe  

Stephen's personal chain of being works up from his particular case through ever-broadening classes toward the universe and God as the class of all classes. Going up gets Stephen to God's address; going down gets God to Stephen, who does not want God to confuse this particular Irish sparrow with any of the others. Also, by situating his name within such a hierarchy of classes, Stephen evades loneliness, becoming a part of larger wholes. Llanfair P. G., on the other hand, remains uniquely isolated. The marvelous name must have been bestowed by poets instead of scientists, for far from revealing the location of the town, it conceals it within a song of self-celebration.

With these preambling remarks I seem in danger of not finding Shakespeare and *Hamlet*, let alone Llanfair P. G. But there is a route from the one to the other, for the hero of *Hamlet* appears by virtue of his proper name to acquire something of the uniqueness and isolation of the Welsh island town. Proper names are the linguistic ultimates—the verbal quarks—of particularizing, the point at which an existentialist reduction would stop, since it is at that point that meaning is stripped from words and we are left to confront sheer being. Thus Wittgenstein observes, "A name cannot be dissected any further by means of definition: it is a primitive sign";\(^1\) and Gilbert Ryle adds, "Dictionaries do not tell us what proper names mean—for the simple reason that they do not mean anything."\(^2\) Instead of meanings, proper names have merely "bearers"—the horse we call Bucephalus or the ship we call *Queen Mary*. "Proper names are arbitrary bestowals," Ryle says, "and convey nothing true and nothing false, for they convey nothing at all" (p. 358).

Meaning, like men, is begotten by coupling. In nature each bird or bush exists merely as itself, unlinked to any class: it simply is. The bearer of a proper name is also simply there, a "this" to which we may point. Only when we couple the perceptual object with a verbal category—"This … is a bird"—does being graduate into meaning. To say "This is Bucephalus," however, is no more than to say "This is this"—or perhaps, with Feste, "That that is is." Radical thisness, which simply is, acquires meaning by merging with a class, by uniting, like Stephen Dedalus, with a larger whole.

Not all proper names are alike, though. At one extreme we find those that particularize almost as impressively as Llanfair P. G. Oscar Wilde, for instance, was born Oscar Fingal O'Flahertie Wills Wilde. Such precise differentiation implies an extraordinary number of Wildes in Dublin. If so, perhaps it is understandable that as this Wilde grew older he jettisoned most of his names and hoped eventually to be known simply as "The Oscar" or "The Wilde"—names designed not to differentiate him from others within the same class but to proclaim him as a class in himself.

At the other extreme are "common" proper names. In his essay "Of Names" Montaigne points out, "History has known three Socrateses, five Platos, eight Aristotles, seven Xenophons, twenty Demetriuses, twenty Theo-dores; and just guess how many it has not known."\(^3\) Here the proper name, grown common, no longer particularizes. Of course no one questions who is meant if we say Socrates, Plato, or Aristotle. But it was the class or universal aspect of the name that appealed to the parents of the third Socrates or the fifth Plato, who
no doubt hoped for a generic transfusion of distinction from the original bearer of the name.

Between these extremes are the proper names normally bestowed on people: Gilbert Ryle, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Bertrand Russell, etc. And here, it would seem, contrary to Ryle, proper names do have a certain meaning and are not arbitrary bestowals. The father of Peter Quince, for instance, may give his son, as arbitrarily as he likes, the name of Peter or John or Fred, quite in keeping with Ryle's claims. But he cannot call him Peter Brown or Jones or Ryle, for his surname represents a class that is not arbitrary. As it is, the forename Peter particularizes the surname Quince by singling out this special ballad-making member of the Quince family. Or, the other way round, the surname Quince universalizes the particular Peter by incorporating him into a larger class. Together, the names comprise a concrete universal abbreviating the descriptive "Peter is a Quince." Thus the individual Peter, who simply "is," acquires meaning quite literally through his "relations," through his membership in a family. By the same token, the Romeo who stands in Juliet's orchard exhibits a roselike, nominalistic uniqueness. By whatever word we call him, he is simply there, like Adam in an earlier garden. But add to Romeo the surname Montague, and he becomes most dangerously meaningful as a member of a feuding class.

How is it, then, with Hamlet? First, it is a play in which Shakespeare, the dramatist godfather, has been both careless and careful with his name-making. His Danes, for instance, are by no means recognizably Danish. As Harry Levin remarks, "If Marcellus and Claudius are Latin, Bernardo and Horatio are Italian, and Fortinbras signifies 'strong arm' not in Norwegian but in French (fort-en-bras)." Scandanavian names, like the Germanic Gertrude, are hard to find. But if this suggests carelessness, a certain carefulness is implied by the characterization of the contentious Fortinbras as "strong arm," or by that of the scholarly Horatio, he who addresses the Ghost and is to deliver Hamlet's story to the surviving audience, as "orator"—if we elide the initial letter and transpose Italian into Latin.

However, Shakespeare seems less concerned with the nationality of his characters' names than with their concrete universality, or lack of it. The play presents us with one Ophelia, one Gertrude, one Laertes, one Polonius, one Horatio, one Osric, and so on. That these characters require only a forename suggests their singularity—though not their individuality, for they certainly have their generic features. Osric, Horatio, and Polonius, for instance, are types of the top, the faithful friend, and the foolish counselor. But although they may be linked as types with other characters in other plays, within Hamlet itself they are distinctly singular, disconnected in nature and in name from the other characters—except of course for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, whom not even names can distinguish.

Claudius, too, has but one name, but his case is quite different, partly because, as "Claudius," he does not exist in Shakespeare's play. We call him Claudius because the original stage direction to Act I, scene ii informs us of the entrance of "Claudius, King of Denmark." Audiences in the theater do not hear stage directions, however. Nor do they hear the name "Claudius" spoken by any of the characters in the play, since the man of that name is without exception referred to as "the King." This is curious on two counts—first, because the character had a name, Feng, in both Saxo and Belieforest and, second, because each of Shakespeare's other kings (Richard II and III, the Henrys, John, Macbeth, and even the regal Lear) is called by his name as well as by his title. Claudius alone is nameless apart from his royal office. Why, one wonders, should it be so particular with him?

"Particular" is precisely what it is not. The particular Claudius is nominally a mystery, a blank. He exists only as the King, and to be called "the King" is not the same as to be called "the Wilde," since the royal class name obscures whereas the proper name announces individuality. Of course Claudius the man is individualized by private thoughts and feelings to which we are made privy, as in his efforts at prayer. But in titling him always "the King," Shakespeare seems to imply a certain erasure of the individual by his office. Thus in Claudius's first scene (I.i) the pronouns of corporate royalty—"we," "our," and "us"—come forth with practiced ease as he ticks off the items of state business. He himself speaks of "the King's rouse" and of himself, even more
His corporate identity is given stately expression by Rosencrantz:

The cease of majesty
Dies not alone, but, like a gulf, doth draw
What's near it with it. It is a massy wheel,
Fixed on the summit of the highest mount,
To whose huge spokes ten thousand lesser
things
Are mortis'd and adjoin'd; which, when it
falls,
Each small annexment, petty consequence,
Attends the boisterous ruin. Never alone
Did the King sigh, but with a general groan.

(III.iii. 15-23)

But the emptying of selfhood by the office is mordantly asserted when Hamlet, having said "The King is a thing," is interrupted by a shocked Guildenstern—"A thing, my lord!"—and concludes, "Of nothing" (IV.ii.30-32). If saying "This is Claudius" is no more meaningful than saying "This is this," then, at the other extreme, saying "This is the King" is no more "beingful" than saying "Let X equal 4 and Y equal 5." In his royal universality Claudius is replete with meaning but devoid of identity—a "thing" or "no-thing"—as though the price of office has been paid in the coin of self.

Generalized in this fashion, the King is appropriate as a "mighty opposite" of Hamlet, perhaps the most complex, unique, and inward-dwelling of literary characters. This uniqueness would seem to be reflected by the singularity of his name, for he, like the others, has but one name. At the risk of seeming foolish, however, we may wonder whether "Hamlet" is forename or surname. It sounds like a forename, of course, but we have no way of knowing. This slight problem is complicated if we recall that Hamlet shares his name with his dead father, old Hamlet. Thus the name both is and is not his. In so far as it is his alone, he is distinctively himself, a unique person; but in so far as it is not his alone, he yields his personal identity to family relations, to the class comprised by at least his father and himself. With these two dimensions of identity, self and son, compressed into one name, Hamlet is neither entirely himself nor wholly consubstantial with his father.

How does Hamlet define himself? Normally we define men as we define words, putting like together with like (genus), then separating out the individual (differentiae). Thus "Man is the animal (genus) that reasons, talks, makes tools, or works out definitions (differentiae)." As with the word "man," so with man himself. Governed by participative tribalism, primitive man had little realization of personal identity: "I" and "we" were largely interchangeable. A Maori, speaking of a tribal battle several hundred years ago, will say, "I defeated the enemy there," or, indicating thousands of acres of tribal land, will say, "This is my land." In this version of Platonic realism, the individual is absorbed by the species. Only gradually in the evolution of culture does such primitive unity yield to multiplicity, the tribal genus separating out into individuals. Similarly within the family, primitive or other, only gradually does the child disengage himself from the parental matrix and acquire a sense of personal identity.

Hamlet's "problem" is in part a matter of self-definition, since he, like all young men, must distinguish himself from his father, from whom he is genetically descended and to whom he is therefore generically related. These genetic and generic aspects of identity fuse in the name which Hamlet inherits from his father. But the name is not all Hamlet inherits. With the Ghost's return to tell his story and to swear Hamlet to revenge, Hamlet inherits also an act of filial obligation. In swearing to revenge his father, he swears in effect to relinquish for a time his personal identity and to unite with his father not merely in name but in actional fact. That is, to assume his father's cause—to adopt as his own his father's enemy, his motives, goals, and pains—is to assume his father's identity. No doubt the deputy is always in some degree an extension of the authority
behind him. All the more so when the deputy is a son endowed with his father's name and sworn to go about his father's business.

Hamlet, however, does not go about his father's business in very great haste, and that—his delay or irresolution—has been a vexed issue among critics. Let me succumb to Hamlet's malady myself for a while and, before discussing him further, turn to two other characters who are in a like situation.

First, Fortinbras, who is something of a puzzle. Criticism has had little to say about him, and that is understandable. He does not appear, by his own or any other name, in Saxo or Belleforest, shows up in person just once before the very end of our play, and is referred to only four times. He speaks even fewer lines than Osric—and the bibliography of Osric criticism is less than voluminous. Yet here is Fortinbras, moving silently around the edges of the play, raising armies against Denmark, employing them against Poland, appearing suddenly amid the carnage of the final scene to receive Hamlet's dying vote, taking charge of Hamlet's funeral, and preparing to assert his title to the Danish throne. But why is he here at all?

Fortinbras is the one other character in the play whose name, like Hamlet's, is both singular and identical with his father's. Of course there are other parallels. Like Hamlet's, Fortinbras's father has been killed—by Hamlet's father—and his father's brother has assumed the throne of Norway, as Claudius has done in Denmark. Fortinbras is prompted, though not by a Ghost, to revenge—to regain the lands forfeited by his father upon his defeat by old Hamlet. Unlike Hamlet, Fortinbras is swift to act. Despite the fact that the encounter between the two kings was a model of chivalric combat, its compact of terms "Well ratified by law and heraldry," young Fortinbras has "Shark'd up a list of landless resolutes" and seeks to recover the land "So by his father lost" (I.i.87 ff.). Not inheriting his father's crown—did old Norway pop in between the election and his hopes?—Fortinbras now seeks by conquest to inherit his land. By defeating the Danes and recovering the lost land, he would engage in a restorative act that would annual his father's defeat and render the son consubstantial with the father.

Thus in taking up his father's cause, as the Ghost implores Hamlet to take up his, Fortinbras "becomes" his father. But the coalescence is short-lived. If old Fortinbras breathes for a time in young Fortinbras, he is killed once and for all through the intervention of Claudius, who warns old Norway of Fortinbras's military ambitions. Distressed by the deception, old Norway

sends out arrests
On Fortinbras; which he, in brief, obeys,
Receives rebuke from Norway, and in fine
Makes vow before his uncle never more
To give th' assay of arms against [Denmark].
Whereon old Norway, overcome with joy,
Gives him three thousand crowns in annual
fee,
And his commission to employ these soldiers,
So levied as before, against the Polack.

(II.ii.67-75)

Fortinbras then takes his army peacefully through Denmark en route to Poland, where he is victorious, and returns to Denmark in time to hear Horatio's account of the tragedy and to prepare to ascend the throne.

One answer to the question "Why does Fortinbras appear in Hamlet?" is that he presents us with a clearly articulated paradigm of self-definition—of the process by which the individual emancipates himself from the bonds of family, especially in this case the father. The steps are clearly marked. First, assuming the cause of old Fortinbras, the son identifies himself with his father. Then, prompted by Norway, he forsweares that cause,
in effect burying his father and giving birth to himself as an individual. Receiving authority from Norway, he takes command of an army, an act that suggests the kind of self-mastery symbolized in the stories of Joseph Conrad by one's taking command of a ship. Finally, his military success in Poland confirms the emergence in Fortinbras of an identity discrete from his father's and distinguished in itself. He now becomes qualified to assume control, not, oddly enough, of Norway, but of Denmark. Why Denmark? Because by indirections, it seems, Fortinbras has found directions out. The Danish lands which he sought through direct conquest to regain in his father's name have come to him after all, by way of a plot of ground in Poland so small that "the numbers cannot try the cause" (IV.iv.63). Pursuing his own cause in Poland, Fortinbras has mysteriously served his father's cause in Denmark. Self-fulfillment, it turns out, is not inconsistent with filial obligation. The two lines of self-definition—genus and differentiae—converge at the same point.

A more obvious parallel to Hamlet, certainly a more frequently noted one, is Laertes, of whom even Hamlet says, "For by the image of my cause I see / The portraiture of his" (V.ii.77-78). Like Fortinbras, Laertes also makes occasions inform against Hamlet, for though both have a father killed and ample excitements of reason and blood, yet Laertes acts with impetuous urgency and Hamlet does not. But that is a beaten path. The present argument would contrast Laertes, certainly with Hamlet, as we shall see, but also with Fortinbras. For we have seen Fortinbras first embrace and then forswear his father's cause, while Laertes perseveres to the death in revenging Polonius.

Laertes' values tend toward the universal—toward "relations"—from the start. Admonishing Ophelia against too much hope in Hamlet, he claims that

    his will is not his own;
    For he himself is subject to his birth.
    He may not, as unvalued persons do,
    Carve for himself, …

(I.iii. 17-20)

The man who loves Ophelia is overshadowed in Laertes' view by the prince, the king's son who is "subject to his birth."

If Laertes cannot distinguish Hamlet from the king's son, neither can he disengage himself from Polonius. Although he is advised "to thine own self be true," the very scene in which the remark is made—with Polonius conferring his blessing and patterns of prudential wisdom upon the departing Laertes—illustrates the dominance of father over son, the latter remaining "subject to his birth" even while journeying abroad. That their physical separation is belied by a psychological merger of father and son is confirmed in II.i, when Polonius coaches Reynaldo in the subtleties of surveillance. Control through precept is reinforced by control through spying. Even in distant, risqué Paris, Laertes remains very much in the sun.

Thus it is quite in accord with what we know of Laertes that upon the death of Polonius he should forsake his life in Paris, rush back to Denmark, and address him-self to sudden vengeance. The extremity of his self-sacrificial commitment is suggested in the extremity of his rhetoric:

    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 reveng'd
    Most throughly for my father.

(IV.v.131-36)
Cool, bland, and shrewd, Claudius finally clams Laertes, until he speaks "Like a good child and a true gentleman" (IV.v.148). Later, playing upon him like a pipe ("Laertes, was your father dear to you? … Not that I think you did not love your father" [IV.vii. 108 ff.]), Claudius rouses his passions again and directs them toward action:

What would you undertake,
   To show yourself your father's son in deed
   More than in words?

   (IV.vii.125-27)

Claudius knows his man, or his son. The dueling plot is conceived and, despite last-second reservations on the part of Laertes, carried out. Laertes does, in deed, show himself his father's son—as we never doubted. So too, in his own roundabout fashion, did Fortinbras show himself his father's son, but not before he had first become his own man.

It is fitting that one as devoted to the generic as Laertes is should ally himself with a man who, as "the King," is the generic personified. But then Claudius and Polonius play the same role toward Laertes, the King's manipulations merely succeeding those of the father. Indeed, since fatherhood is implicit in kingship, Claudius is a symbolic substitute for Polonius, ostensibly serving the father's cause while actually securing his own ends. With the King incorporating the Polonius principle of paternal dominance as well as his own unroyal motives, it is apropos that the dying Laertes should cry, "the King, the King's to blame" (V.ii.331). Perhaps with these words, and with his exchange of forgiveness with Hamlet (which suggests that he is not willing to sacrifice quite everything for his father, in contrast to his earlier "I dare damnation"), Laertes gains for himself at least some small measure of personal identity.

Hamlet's situation is of course more complicated than that of Fortinbras or Laertes. For one thing, Laertes and Fortinbras are, so far as we know, motherless. This in itself—the exclusively father-son aspect of their stories—alerts us by parallel to the paternal aspect of Hamlet's situation, which we might have scanted if we adopted a Freudian viewpoint or, say, accepted T. S. Eliot's claim that "Mr. Robertson is undoubtedly correct in concluding that the essential emotion of the play is the feeling of a son towards a guilty mother."? If we should not overplay the mother-son relationship, as Robertson and Eliot and Oliver's movie may have done, neither should we disregard it. I shall have little to say on that score, simply because others have said much. Criticism, after all, is a corporate venture, or at least a potluck meal to which each of us brings something, without, we all hope, too much duplication of dishes.

I have stressed the paradoxical duality of Hamlet's identity, as both self and son, the two coalescing in his name, which is and is not his. For Hamlet to be either the son, through merger with his father, or entirely himself, through division from his father, is made more difficult by his having a surplus of fathers. His first utterance in the play is in response to the word "son." "But now, my cousin Hamlet," Claudius says, "and my son,—," at which point Hamlet interjects, "A little more than kin, and less than kind" (I.ii.64-65). In one reading of this, Hamlet's words play on universals—"kin" and "kind" (as species): "We are too closely related, having nothing in common." Asked to trade in one father for another, he is indeed, as he says, "too much i' th' sun" (67). At this point, the individual Hamlet is too much in shadow. His "inky cloak" (77), which contrasts on stage with the ordinary clothes of the others, seems to emphasize his separateness, but actually emblematizes his choice of fathers. Whatever psychological kinship he may have with Claudius—however much his Oedipal impulse to kill his father and marry his mother associates him with the man who has done both already—it occasions in him only repugnance.8

At this point the Hamlet of "vailed lids" (70) and "suits of woe" (86) is less his own man than his father's grieving son. This universalized identity is modified, however, by a particularity of feeling in Hamlet. "Thou know'st 'tis common," Gertrude reminds him, "all that lives must die." But with his "Ay, madam, it is
common,” Hamlet rejects the common (universal) as common (vulgar). "If it be," she replies, "why seems it so particular with thee?" "Seems, madam!" (72-76)—and in a famous speech he recoils from the universality not only of death but also of seeming: "But I have that within which passeth show" (85). Universals, however, are hard to elude, and particulars hard to catch. Flush a particular out of one generic bush, it only finds cover in another. Hamlet's inner particularity of feeling frees him from the universality of courtly seeming, only to bind him to his father.

If Hamlet is dominated at this point by "relations”—by universal aspects of identity—it is appropriate that his father's Ghost returns not merely to enlighten him but to impose upon him the burden of action. For it is a peculiarity of language that although we can particularize substantives—zeroing in on the haecceitas, quiddity, or "inscape" of things or people—the individuality of actions quite escapes the wide-gauge mesh of our verbal nets. Demonstrative adjectives like "this" and "that," and proper nouns of the sort discussed earlier, can be made to single out unique objects—"that man in the corner wearing a yellow tie" or Beethoven's "Eroica." But no class of verb corresponds to the demonstrative adjective, and the notion of a "proper verb" ties knots in one's imagination. The most vivid and active of verbs—say, "slash" or "hack"—is doomed by its nature to abstraction.9 And of course it is precisely that most abstract and universal of all verbs, "to be," that frets Hamlet in his most famous soliloquy—during which the universal "not to be" seems an acceptable escape to him until dreams intrude ("Perchance to dream!"). dreams issue from particular experience, the private, unsharable psyche.

An act, as Macbeth knows even before he himself acts, is defined by its consequences, and a man may be defined by his acts. If Macbeth brings into being the act of regicide, that act reciprocates by bringing Macbeth into being in a new and murderous form. When the actor is summed up by his act, he inevitably absorbs the generic character of action. He who poisons is a "poisoner," who lies is a "liar," and who revenges is a "revenger." Inducted into the category of verbal noun in this fashion, the actor takes on meaning, especially in the eyes of the law. What he loses in the process is a wealth of "being," all of the characteristics apart from the act that define the actor for what he uniquely is.10 It is this "being," his individuality, that Hamlet is asked to sacrifice to become a "revenger." Moreover, Hamlet's act is to be performed, not for himself, like Macbeth's, but for his father, so that he is doubly subordinated, to the universality of action and to the role of father surrogate.

An act is defined by its consequences, and in the "To be or not to be" soliloquy Hamlet ponders the consequences of the ultimate act of suicide, which will be defined by an unknown "something after death" that "puzzles the will" and so causes his enterprise to "lose the name of action." But an act is also defined by its context, or scene, and what puzzles Hamlet's will about the act of revenge is its context—the world of Denmark so well described by Maynard Mack."11 Unlike Shakespeare's other major tragic heroes, each of whom introduces evil into a world of comparative innocence, Hamlet inherits a world already contaminated by Claudius's misdeeds. Thus, whereas Lear, Othello, and Macbeth have primarily themselves to come to terms with, Hamlet has both himself and his scene—a world of mystery, disease, corruption, degeneration, seeming, and death. To exist amid contamination, merely to suffer a world in which the bottom has fallen out of all values, is task enough. To have to act, and to bear the identity imparted by one's action, is harder yet. But the Ghost asks even more of Hamlet—that he touch pitch and remain undefiled: "But howsoever thou pursuest this act, / Taint not thy mind" (I.v.84-85).12 If men are defined by their acts, and acts by their contexts, then the Ghost's caveat seems a riddling impossibility. Hamlet's predicament is illuminated by contrast with that of Laertes and Claudius, who care nothing for context. Laertes would prove his father's son by cutting Hamlet's throat "i' th' church," letting the holy scene define the act, and himself, however foully; and Claudius is in agreement: "No place, indeed, should murder sanctuarize" (IV.vii. 127-28).

Hamlet cannot be so unmindful of his scene, or of his precedents. If he is to kill a king, he must share his identity with all killers of kings. As he contemplates regicide, his precedents are chivalric combat in the field, on the one hand, and murder in the orchard, on the other—the open sword of old Hamlet or the concealed
poison of Claudius. The chivalric style of old Hamlet and old Fortinbras, however, has receded into the feudal, almost mythic past. Once Claudius's poison has seeped into Denmark, coursing like quicksilver through "The natural gates and alleys" (I.v.67) of not merely old Hamlet's body but the body politic as well, chivalric combat waged under covenants of honor is hopelessly anachronistic. Claudius is the modern model, poison and lies the modern weapons, a diseased and rotten world the modern context. Now act! the Ghost demands, and "Taint not thy mind."

When corruption goes abroad, the sensitive individual normally goes apart, seeking private sanctuary from the public plague. Romeo and Juliet follow this course, retiring into Juliet's orchard, denying family ties, and striving to meet as purely individual lovers. However, the fact that the orchard in Hamlet is the original scene of corruption implies the unavailability of this solution to Hamlet. Nor are the groves of academe open to him: even before he learns of his father's murder, his intention of returning to Wittenberg is intercepted by Claudius. If, withdrawing, he cannot be himself in Wittenberg, he is assured by Claudius that, remaining, he can "Be as ourself in Denmark" (I.ii.122). In the shared identity of the common noun "king-killer," Hamlet risks being just that.

However much Hamlet might prefer to remain uniquely himself, isolated from a Denmark that is out of joint, he is compelled by family to act, to insert himself destructively into the context of society. Under normal conditions, not to act at all would carry a guarantee of innocence. Given the Ghost's injunction to revenge, however, inaction is as fraught with guilt as action. To remain true to himself, free of defiling action, Hamlet must of necessity betray his father's Ghost. To adopt his father's cause, on the other hand, he must betray himself.

Let me leave Hamlet at this point—puzzled of will, irresolute, berating himself for his failures to act—and examine T. S. Eliot's claim that "Hamlet's bafflement … is a prolongation of the bafflement of his creator in the face of his artistic problem" (p. 125). I have elided Eliot's reference to the "objective correlative" here because I am concerned, not with how well Shakespeare reifies emotions in the play, but with how he achieves structural unity in it. For the structure of Hamlet is, if not perhaps a baffling, surely a troubling problem for the play's creator. How he solves the problem will get us back to Hamlet's problems with his divided identity.

The structural problem of Hamlet, or indeed of any play, is implied by Hamlet's address to the players, when he urges them to "Suit the action to the word, the word to the action" (III.ii.19-20). Of course he refers to acting, but his words apply equally well to drama itself, which requires a coalescence of words and action, poetry and performance, dead script and live actors. That coalescence, and the temporary lack of it, are most apparent in the form of revenge tragedy, where the initial "word"—the hero's vow of revenge—is fulfilled by a terminal "action"—the revenge itself—with the interval between the two devoted to attempts by the hero to bring about the desired fusion. In Hamlet, however, the fact that the interval is an interval, an eddy in the dramatic current, is not concealed, as it usually is in revenge tragedy, but proclaimed—by Hamlet himself, by the Ghost's return, by the contrast of Hamlet with Laertes and Fortinbras. In retrospect we can see that the form of the play can be likened to several rhetorical constructions, at the lowest level the scheme "tmesis," in which a compound word is separated by an interjection, as in Hopkins's "brim, in a flash, full." Tmesis is, in Puttenham's taxonomy, a "figure of disorder," as, at a higher syntactic level, is "parenthesis," in which the development of a sentence is interrupted by interposed words. Higher yet, at the level of argument, the analogue to tmesis and parenthesis is "parecbasis" or digression, a trope of invention in which, as Thomas Wilson says, "We sometimes swarve from the matter, upon just considerations, making the same to serve for our purpose, as well as if we had kept the matter still." In each of these constructions, as in Hamlet, the accentuated interval between beginning and end threatens the unity of expression—hence Puttenham's term "figures of disorder." The coherent, ordered interval between "tick" and "tock," in Frank Kermode's interesting example, is in danger of deteriorating into the meaningless,
chaotic interval between "tock" and "tick." In such constructions, great stress is placed on the end-term, which must rescue the stalled or diverted middle from irrelevance. Of course the middle may not always be rescuable. Wilson, speaking of digression, says he knew "a Preacher that was a whole hower out of his matter, and at length remembring himself, saied well, now to the purpose … whereat many laughed, and some for starke wearinessse were faine to goe away" (p. 182). In the preacher's sermon the end evidently issued directly from the beginning, the digressive middle being a throwaway. Ideally, the end in this kind of form should unite with both the beginning and the middle. Thus in Hopkins's "brim, in a flash, full' the end-term "full" completes the beginning semantically and issues from the middle alliteratively.

How is it, then, with Hamlet? Its structure requires an act of completion, a final murder that will fulfill the initial vow of revenge. At the same time, if the middle is to be relevant, the act of revenge should be a product of the hero's efforts subsequent to his vow. But that is just what we do not have. The killing of Claudius fulfills the initial vow, but it is not a product of Hamlet's efforts during the middle of the play. Indeed, Claudius's death, as Dr. Johnson complains, "is at last effected by an incident which Hamlet has no part in producing." Not that Hamlet has been inactive. He has assumed an antic disposition, mocked Polonius, traduced Ophelia, toyed with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, directed "The Murder of Gonzago," killed Polonius, reviled his mother, boarded a pirate ship, and contemplated skulls. But none of these acts has swept his way to revenge, and in fact when he has Claudius at his mercy he spares him, albeit for unmerciful reasons. Finally, after all this digressive action and inaction, we arrive at the scene of the duel, where Shakespeare, rather like Wilson's preacher, apparently remembers himself and says, "Well, now to the purpose."

If the play requires an act of completion, the act requires an actor or agent. The logical agent, the Ghost, is evidently lacking in the required corporeality, and so must employ Hamlet as an instrument. But Hamlet is diverted—in part, as Maynard Mack has argued, by his world. Faced with a well-defined, concrete task, to kill a king, Hamlet expands upon it infinitely, becoming preoccupied with the sordid nature of the world he inherits from Claudius. Turning from his particular task, he addresses himself to universal issues. The point is writ small in the "To be or not to be" soliloquy, where the specific question "Should Hamlet commit suicide?" is quickly ballooned into the universal "Why should man live in such a world?" However, it is typical of the slipperiness of universals and particulars that in universalizing his problem Hamlet particularizes himself. For it is during this middle period—in soliloquy and conversation and, to be sure, in such actions as I have indicated above—that Hamlet reveals himself to us as perhaps the most individualized character in literature.

During this period Hamlet is, in a complex fashion, naming himself. To do so, he must sacrifice his father, abandoning his cause and paying the price in guilt. That is, naming himself involves "de-naming" himself as his father's son. Like Stephen Dedalus, who defines himself more by division than by merger—disengaging himself from church, state, family, and school-fellows—Hamlet acts on the Spinozan principle that Omnis determinatio est negatio, "All determination is negation." He asserts, not what he is, but what he is not—disjoining himself by word or deed from old Hamlet, Polonius, Ophelia, Laertes, Gertrude, and, most of all, Claudius. His identity grows complex, not by multiplying relationships, but by multiplying disrelationships. His multifariousness of being would be radically curtailed if his thoughts and feelings were channeled exclusively into the role of revenger, if self were subsumed under son. And yet, precisely because it is not, because the freewheeling, irresolute self takes priority over the dedicated son, Shakespeare's play seems in danger of deteriorating from dramatic action into personal biography. If the individualized Hamlet of the middle of the play is irrelevant, and even apparently an impediment, to Hamlet the generic revenger, is not the middle of the play itself irrelevant to the structure? Is the middle rescuable?

To talk further about dramatic unity in Hamlet, let me adapt some notions from John Crowe Ransom's theory of the "concrete universal." Ransom's theory—derived from Kant, Hegel, Coleridge, and perhaps Clive Bell—holds that a universal idea or argument, the "structure" of the poem, is given concrete embodiment in a "texture" of local details. As Wimsatt and Brooks explain:
Though the texture is strictly irrelevant to the logic of the poem, yet it does after all affect the shape of the poem; it does so by impeding the argument. The very irrelevance of the texture is thus important. Because of its presence we get, not a streamlined argument, but an argument that has been complicated through having been hindered, and diverted, and having thus had its very success threatened. In the end we have our logic, but only after a lively reminder of the aspects of reality with which logic cannot cope.18

Ransom is talking about poems, especially short lyric poems; but if we transpose for drama, the poetic "argument" becomes the dramatic plot, the pattern of evolving action, which is "universal" in that it is shared by plays comprising, in Hamlet's case, the revenge tragedy genre. That plot—featuring a crime, a vow to revenge, obstacles to the revenge, and a final fulfillment of the vow in a murderous act—is, in Ransom's term, "impeded" by an irrelevant texture. In Hamlet this impediment is the middle of the play, where Hamlet the unique individual receives expression at the expense of Hamlet the revenging son.

Since delay is a built-in feature of the revenge tragedy form, plays of this sort normally set obstacles before the hero. They do not normally make the hero himself the major obstacle, and they certainly do not have him repeatedly announce that nothing impedes his revenge but himself:

I do not know
Why yet I live to say, "This thing's to do,"
Sith I have cause and will and strength and
means
To do't.

(IV.iv.43-46)

Hamlet is baffled here and elsewhere, according to Eliot, because Shakespeare is baffled—unable to find an objective correlative adequate to the emotion he seeks to express. I would argue, however, that Shakespeare is not baffled, he is resistant. Hamlet's expressions of bafflement publicize the structural hiatus in Shakespeare's play and—by announcing the presence on his part of cause, will, strength, and means—suggest that his delay is at least partly arbitrary, a product less of Hamlet himself than of the dramatic form and his author. For Hamlet stands not only between himself and his revenge upon Claudius but also between the form of revenge tragedy and its fulfillment in Shakespeare's play. And of course it is Shakespeare who has stood him there. Hamlet's inexplicably stalled revenge, in other words, is to some extent a meta-dramatic reflection of Shakespeare's resistance to the conventional, hackneyed revenge tragedy form.

Let me put it, as I think Shakespeare has, in terms of names. During the period of delay, Hamlet is in effect naming himself in all his complex individuality. At the same time Shakespeare is, if not exactly naming himself, at least naming his play in all its complex individuality. And this naming, like Hamlet's, involves a "de-naming." For there is one more curious parallel concerning names. Fortinbras is not the only analogue to Hamlet in having a name that is both his own and his father's. The play Hamlet has also—or in its own time had—such a dual identity. Its dramatic "father," the lost play written around 1589 presumably by Thomas Kyd, was also called Hamlet, by which name one of its performances was recorded by Henslowe in June 1594. This play, now known as the ur-Hamlet, is thus related to Shakespeare's Hamlet—both genetically (as a source) and generically (as a revenge tragedy)—precisely as old Hamlet is related to young Hamlet.

In this sense Shakespeare's problem is analogous to his hero's. Like Hamlet, Shakespeare has committed himself (has he "sworn" to the Chamberlain's Men?) to a generic task, not an act of revenge but an act of restoration, the writing of a play based on the ur-Hamlet. Adopting Kyd's plot and some of his dramatic techniques, Shakespeare risks producing a play that shares not merely its name but its nature with its literary forebear. As the name "Hamlet" both is and is not Hamlet's, so the title Hamlet is and is not Shakespeare's. Of course we do not know the contents of Kyd's play, but the repetition from it of the phrase "Hamlet
revenge”—by Lodge in *Wit's Miserie*, by Dekker in *Satiromastix*, and in a pamphlet by Samuel Rowlands—suggests that it stressed the act of revenge itself rather than the enervating effects of self-exploration. If this self-exploration distinguishes Hamlet from other revenge tragedy heroes, then form-exploration distinguishes *Hamlet* from other revenge tragedy plays. For in having Hamlet publicize his inactivity as revenger, Shakespeare calls the generic structure of his play into question, even as Hamlet calls himself into question. In their similar self-reflexive ways, then, both hero and play become individualized, confiscating for themselves the names they share with their respective "fathers." The nominal identity and generic kinship of Shakespeare's play with Kyd's are merely a matrix from which the unique, self-conscious particularity of *Hamlet* develops. But in the process Shakespeare has opened the door of delay so wide that he endangers the unity of his play. How he escapes that danger we shall have to try to find out.

If, as I have just said, Shakespeare's play is form-conscious, it is also, as many have said, theater-conscious as well. A touring stage company suddenly appears in Denmark, allusions are made to the child actors of Shakespeare's time, Polonius supplies a catalogue of dramatic genres, a player auditions for Hamlet in the role of Hecuba, Hamlet discourses on styles of acting, "The Mousetrap" is performed, the words *act* and *play* are endlessly explored, and so forth. One effect of this within the play is that the illusions of theatrical art and the "seeming" of Claudius's court interpenetrate to fashion a pervasive mysteriousness in which reality dissolves and metamorphoses like the forms in an engraving by Escher. This mysteriousness invades not only Hamlet's Denmark but the audience's *Hamlet*. Uncertain whether drama is a metaphor for life, or life a metaphor for drama, we grow, like Hamlet, unsure of our own world. Are we in the play or is the play in us? Where does the apron stop? With Ophelia "acting" for Hamlet, and Hamlet "acting" for the King and Polonius, and the King and Polonius, and all, acting for us, who are observing the King and Polonius observing Hamlet observing Ophelia—how far out does the fiction reach to incorporate our world? On the other hand, the play-within-the-play and all its quasi-dramatic satellites serve as Brechtian "alienation devices" to disengage us from the play as "real life" and make us see it, at least momentarily, as an artificial construct—pure theatrical illusion—quite distanced from ourselves.

This ambiguous in-and-outness is reflected in Hamlet himself. Any dramatic character has in a sense a dual identity. On the one hand, he is a more or less realistic person whom we see making choices and taking actions that help create the plot of the play. On the other hand, he is less his own person than the playwright's instrument. *He* does not choose and act; he is made to choose and act to fulfill the needs of the play. Thus a character is both an agent of action, doing his own will, and an instrument of action, dancing to the tune of the author and his plot. Ideally, the playwright fashions a character who serves the plot while appearing to act on his own.

This division of identity appears in any literary character, whether in novel, poem, or play. Plays, however, give rise to a reinforcing division of identity that allows us to distinguish between "character" and "actor"—between the illusion of a man named Hamlet and, say, John Gielgud, who conveys that illusion to us. If we are conscious only of the character Hamlet, we are absorbed in the play as fictional life. If we become conscious of the actor Gielgud, however, Hamlet the character disappears, however briefly, and with him the fiction of real life in Denmark. We are left with theater—with Gielgud and grease paint, aprons, props, makeshift illusions. Hamlet the character acts, as it were, on his own volition within the fictional world, but Gielgud the actor is constrained by plot and script, by the role he is handed. If the actor finds his role unsatisfactory, he may complain to the playwright, "Hamlet would not say that, he would say this," or "Why doesn't he kill him while he's praying—he just proved he's guilty?" Or, as the actor gets further into his role, "he" becomes "I"—"Why is Fortinbras sent to war when I, who have cause and means and strength to do't, cannot be loosed upon this Claudius?"

In *Hamlet*, Shakespeare seems to have fashioned a character who is conscious of his dual identity and able to articulate it, almost as though he were an actor at a rehearsal. He puzzles over the fact that as a character he is fully equipped for revenge but that as an actor, or instrument, he is not allowed to proceed with it. Thus,
envying the player's facility with tears, distraction, and a broken voice, Hamlet says:

What would he do,
Had he the motive and the cue for passion
That I have?

(II.ii.586-88)

We see Hamlet here not as a character but as an actor—an actor playing Hamlet, who is envying an actor playing Hecuba. Lamenting that his own role is full of passionate potentials to which he is denied expressive access, he seems to rebel against his role and, as if to spite his author, clarions passion in all directions, ending in a great spate of invective: “Bloody, bawdy villain! / Remorseless, treacherous, lecherous, kindless villain!” (608-609). Then, as though embarrassed by this out-of-character, or out-of-role, behavior, he tries to talk his way back into his part:

Why, what an ass am I! This is most brave,
That I, the son of a dear father murder'd,
Prompted to my revenge by heaven and hell,
Must, like a whore, unpack my heart with words,
And fall a-cursing, like a very drab,
A scullion!
Fie upon't! Foh! About my brain!

(611-17)

Throughout the middle of the play, Hamlet the character is allowed—is, of course, obliged—to explore the plenitude of his own being, to spin out on the filaments of speech the magic and marvelous web of his personality. The actor-Hamlet is permitted his complaints, his bafflement, his minor revolts, but for the most part he is suppressed. However, if the play is to conclude, Hamlet the singer of self must be silenced; otherwise, he could go on endlessly examining himself and his world until an eddying in the dramatic current became a whirlpool. But this transition must be carefully negotiated, for if Shakespeare simply transforms the truant individual into the generic avenger, the middle of the play will have been lost to episodic irrelevance. What Shakespeare needs for his digressive structure—to make his "swarving from the matter" serve his purpose "as well as if [he] had kept the matter still"—is an end-term that will both rescue the middle and fulfill the beginning. I think he provides such a term in the graveyard and duel scenes of Act V.

Most critics agree that after the ocean voyage we encounter a changed Hamlet, one whose restless questioning of himself and his world has given way to something like resignation. He has been off stage for a little over three scenes. He is dressed differently from when we last saw him. He can now admire unpremeditated action, talk of a divinity that shapes our ends, see a special providence in the fall of a sparrow, and address himself to his own death composedly. The question, of course, is "Why?" It is not easily answered, however, for which reason it is not often asked. Hamlet accepts his world, but Shakespeare "does not outline for us the process of acceptance" (Mack, p. 520).

Some of the difficulty may lie in Hamlet's ambiguously divided nature. As a realistic character, Hamlet passes from irresolution to a readiness for action, from self-exploration and cosmic doubt to an acceptance of self and world. Such a change, we feel, should be made psychologically plausible, but since the change occurs off stage, Hamlet's thoughts and feelings remain undramatized. In his other mode of being, as the instrument of the playwright, Hamlet must exchange the role of truant for that of revenger. Since roles do not have psyches, the only plausibility required is formal: Hamlet must be maneuvered to serve the causal demands of the plot and the aesthetic context of the play. In both modes he moves from the particular toward the universal, passing (as a person) from self toward son, from individual toward society, and (as a role) from structural
irrelevance toward contextual integration. As a character he now becomes answerable to his ghostly father. As a role he becomes answerable to Shakespeare—another kind of father, and especially so if Rowe was correct about Shakespeare's having acted the part of the Ghost.

I suspect that no attempt to supply reasons, motives, psychological grounds for Hamlet's change will prove entirely persuasive. Nor is it adequate to claim that Shakespeare, having individualized Hamlet, simply shifts from a realistic into a dramaturgical gear and abandons the character for the role of revenger required by the plot. Shakespeare has not done either one or the other entirely but both simultaneously, because his goal is to fuse the two dimensions of Hamlet that have previously been divided. From the concrete and the universal Hamlets must come the concrete-universal Hamlet. The individual "I" must unite with the generic "son," the agent with the instrument, the character with the actor. Thus the change is effected partly in psychological terms, partly in symbolic ones.

To begin with, one thing at least seems clear and direct: the exact moment of the change. It is underscored for us in Hamlet's account of his ocean voyage at the start of Act V, scene ii:

Sir, in my heart there was a kind of fighting
That would not let me sleep. Methought I lay
Worse than the mutines in the bilboes.…

(4-6)

Pausing here, we should note that these lines sum up for us the Hamlet we have known prior to the ocean voyage, a Hamlet whose restlessness of spirit precluded resignation, who could neither "sleep" contentedly in Claudius's Denmark nor risk what dreams might come in the "sleep" of death, who regarded Denmark as a prison and himself in shackles, as he told Rosencrantz, and who has mutinied against Denmark's new command, not to mention his own revenging role. Out of this irresolution of half-sleep, half-waking, Hamlet suddenly, rashly—"And prais'd be rashness for it"—rises, fingers the packet kept by his schoolfellows, opens it, and discovers Claudius's commission to England, which he rewrites and seals, along with the fates of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern.

In retrospect, as he tells Horatio the story, Hamlet marvels at the ease and effectiveness of these unpremeditated acts. Rashly he arose, and rashness is to be praised. Rashly he rewrote the commission—"Ere I could make a prologue to my brains, / They had begun the play" (30-31)—and his rashness saves his life. On the one hand, he acts on impulse to protect himself, but at the same time he feels himself acted upon, as part of a larger order of causation. The "divinity that shapes our ends, / Rough-hew them how we will" (10-11), which is part of Hamlet the character's world, is paralleled by the later "prologue" and "play," which are part of Hamlet the actor's world. Or, rather, he—as he is now realizing—is a part of them: the providential plot within, the revenge tragedy plot without.

The focal source of Hamlet's change—the major prop of his shipboard drama—is the King's commission. If the earlier Hamlet individualized himself in part by pondering universal issues, the universal now becomes most frighteningly particular when he reads the commission, his death warrant. Death does not here take the abstract form of universal verbs, "To be or not to be," but the concretely imagined crush of flesh and bone under the stroke of an unsharpened ax, the head—his head—rolling and spurting under the studious gaze of his two schoolfellows. Yet curiously enough, this particularizing of death—as though the King's commission has converted "death" from an abstract noun into a proper name—seems less awful to Hamlet than the universalized death of his famous soliloquy. Why?

Because, I think, of the indirections Shakespeare is pursuing in this act, which are of two sorts. First, the moment of Hamlet's crucial change is not dramatized for us but narrated. It takes place in that great off-stage void from which only ghosts, ambassadors, and pirate messengers return. As history, therefore, Hamlet's
change can appear only in retrospect, filtered to us through time the distancer and Hamlet the tale-teller, so that the changing Hamlet lives only in the voice of the changed Hamlet.

The second indirection is more curious: Shakespeare's inversion of the logical syntax of Act V. Why, we cannot help wondering, does the playwright let Hamlet converse with Horatio through a lengthy graveyard scene without once mentioning the ocean voyage, the events of which we should have expected him to disclose immediately? Perhaps for the same reason that Shakespeare narrates rather than dramatizes the sea change, for by inverting his dramatic syntax he causes the story of the sea voyage to issue as much from the graveyard scene as from the voyage itself. Hamlet's shipboard experiencing of potential death, or rather his telling of it, is thus colored by his graveyard experiences, in which we see him coming to terms with the corporeal reality of death as both universal (the various skulls) and particular (Ophelia).

Hamlet's encounter with death at sea, not as a universal but as concrete and personal, is a culmination of that whole middle section of the play in which he has individualized or named himself. The last step in his naming of the "I" in "Hamlet" is his naming of death as "mine." It marks his completion as an individual. But, as befits a divided Hamlet, death works two ways. His reading of the commission, in so far as it symbolizes his own death, kills off the individual Hamlet we have known and gives rise, phoenixlike, to the universalized revenger who will act in this last scene. But in so far as Hamlet rewrites the commission, evading his death, it represents, not the killing off, but the fulfillment of Hamlet the individual, who assimilates death and becomes qualified to universalize himself as the play moves toward its climax. Thus both of Shakespeare's "indirections"—the narration and the inversion of sequence—conspire to particularize Hamlet's experience at sea and yet to subsume that particular under the aegis of the universal.

In the graveyard we encounter a Hamlet who is already changed. The graveyard is itself a scene of ends, reminding us of the parts we all play within the plot of our lives, and the first words we hear, from the grave-digging clowns—a prelude to Hamlet's entrance—sound the theme of agents and instruments. The question is whether Ophelia drowned herself or was drowned accidentally. The answer of the churlish Priest is that she drowned herself and should, as an agent of her own destruction, lie in unsanctified ground, sans prayer and requiem. However, "great command o'ersways the order" of the Priest (V.i.251), so that Ophelia receives, if not full absolution, at least the ambiguity of "maimed rites" (242).

If Ophelia's "death was doubtful" (250), leaving us uncertain whether she was active agent or passive instrument, Hamlet increasingly regards all life and death as episodes in a larger plot. Those whose skulls he examines—the politician, the courtier, Lord Such-aone, the lawyer, the great buyer of land, and even Yorick—play their parts in their individual dramas and make a common exit to the tiring house of soil. Even death itself is part of a process. In a still more comprehensive plot, Alexander exits from life only to enter upon another series of roles, as noble dust, earth, loam, and, at the vulgar end, beerbarrel stopper.

Hamlet too has become part of a larger plot, which he now accepts without complaint or bafflement. He is reconciled, not merely to his world, but to his role in Shakespeare's play. Earlier, if I can strain to make a point, he aspired to the role, not of revenger, but of dramatist, seeking to attain the kind of synoptic overview that would enable him to understand the entire play, instead of contenting himself with the limited perspective vouchsafed him as a character. With his return to Denmark, however, he begins to accept his place in the dramatic context rather than trying to dominate and transcend it.

Shakespeare signifies this transition, once again, with a name, when Hamlet issues his challenge to Laertes at the grave of Ophelia: "This is I, / Hamlet, the Dane!" (V.i.280-81). His announcement is a model of self-definition. The anonymous "this" becomes the unique "I," who is part of the paternally shared "Hamlet," who merges with the universal "Dane." During the middle of the play, Hamlet could have gone no further than the "I." Now, as he is about to descend with Laertes into a grave and emerge again—a shorthand version of the death-and-rebirth symbolism of the sea voyage—the presence of all three terms implies the
accommodation of the confirmed self within a universal context.

Hamlet's "This is I, / Hamlet, the Dane!" represents the end of the hero's naming of himself, his verbal self-definition. He now moves toward definition by action. But name and act may be more closely related than we suspect. If a man can be defined by his act, perhaps the reciprocal is true: to define oneself is to predispose oneself to action. Naming is not merely symbolic action—a substitute for doing—but incipient action—a preparation for doing. Hamlet's naming of himself at Ophelia's grave, then, should contain the act of revenge in potentia. That this is so is made more evident when Hamlet, having told Horatio of the ocean voyage, goes on to say:

Does it not, thinks't thee, stand me now
upon—
He that hath kill'd my king and whor'd my mother,
Popp'd in between th' election and my hopes,
Thrown out his angle for my proper life,
And with such cozenage—is't not perfect conscience,
To quit him with this arm?

(V.ii.63-68)

Hamlet's revenge will be justified by Claudius's evil acts, which correspond precisely to the three terms of self-definition in Hamlet's "This is I, / Hamlet, the Dane!" The primal act of killing "my king," which paved the way to the whoring of "my mother," brings into focus Hamlet the son who bears his father's name. Stealing the election for kingship emphasizes Hamlet as Prince of Denmark, "the Dane." And the angling for his "proper life" calls forth Hamlet the unique individual. The revenge-minded hero is warranted to act as "I," as "Hamlet," and as "Dane"—self, son, and prince.

Having been rendered potential through naming, the act must now be made actual through performance. And Shakespeare stages its performance most carefully. Despite Hamlet's praise of "rashness," he does not, like Laertes, simply storm the King's quarters with bloody intent. Nor, on the other hand, does he devise Machiavellian plots and stratagems to effect his revenge. To do so would be to accept Claudius's early invitation, "Be as ourself in Denmark" (I.ii.122), and to become tainted by the world of seeming in which he maneuvered. (Whereas even Claudius admits to Laertes that their plot is likely to succeed because Hamlet, "Most generous and free from all contriving" [IV.vii.136], will not examine the foils.)

To the contrary, Hamlet has forsworn plots, having come to feel that "our indiscretion sometimes serves us well / When our dear plots do pall" (V.ii.8-9). Instead of a plotter, he is now a player, with parts in other plots—that of providence, that of Shakespeare. He has a part also in Claudius's plot, a role that requires him to "fall to play" with Laertes.

Immediately before this final "play," however, Hamlet makes a generous gesture of apology to Laertes:

    What I have done
    That might your nature, honour, and exception
    Roughly awake, I here proclaim was madness.
Was't Hamlet wrong'd Laertes? Never Hamlet!
If Hamlet from himself be ta'en away,
And when he's not himself does wrong
Laertes,
Then Hamlet does it not, Hamlet denies it.
Who does it, then? His madness. If t be so,
Hamlet is of the faction that is wrong'd;
His madness is poor Hamlet's enemy.
(V.ii.241-50)

This is a curious apology because the offense is left unidentified as simply "it" and "What I have done." We may assume that Hamlet refers to his outburst at the grave of Ophelia, which Claudius and Gertrude both labeled "madness." But his apology seems excessive to that somewhat peripheral occasion, and I think Shakespeare—by keeping the offense vague, by having Laertes speak of his motives for "revenge" (255-57)—means us to see through the business in the grave-yard to the primary offense, Hamlet's murder of Polonius. For it is certainly that, rather than the scuffling in the grave, for which Laertes is already plotting revenge.

Hamlet lays all blame at the cell-door of madness because, of course, until his own revenge is consummated, he must pretend to an "antic disposition." But "madness" here is less an outright lie than a metaphor. The apology repeats the theme of identity—"Hamlet" and "not-Hamlet." Hamlet sane and Hamlet mad—that we have marked in the division between son and self. In these terms Hamlet's "madness" issues from his identity as son, since it is in this role that he is obliged to be, as he told his mother after murdering Polonius, "mad in craft" (III.iv.188) in order to conceal his designs from Claudius. It is also Hamlet the son, not Hamlet the unrelated self, who stabs Polonius, thinking him Claudius ("Is it the King? … I took thee for thy better" [26, 32]), who in the same scene extols old Hamlet and denigrates his successor, and who uses words like daggers to pierce his mother's conscience. The equation of madness with Hamlet the son is made explicit with the reappearance of the Ghost, whose special relationship to Hamlet is underscored by its invisibility to Gertrude. As Hamlet says, "Do you not come your tardy son to chide," Gertrude cries, "Alas, he's mad!" (105-106). As a metaphor for Hamlet's bond to his father—for that sense in which Hamlet as revenger is "possessed" by his father's Ghost—Hamlet's "madness" is truly no part of himself, and is in fact "poor Hamlet's enemy." For his personal identity and fullness of self lie in his unrelated particularity—that concrete "being" which is in excess of and irrelevant to his universal "meaning" as son and revenger.

Just prior to the duel, then, Hamlet seeks to dismiss as "madness" that part of himself which sought to revenge his father and killed Laertes' father instead. His apology seeks not only to erase that murderous act; it would, if accepted by Laertes, divest both men of their "sonship"—exorcising the "ghosts" of the dead fathers, who demand revenge—so that they might meet as discrete individuals. Thus for a brief moment as the play tips toward its fatal conclusion Shakespeare recalls for us the Hamlet of the middle of the play—the self-searching, multifarious "I" to which has subsequently been added "Hamlet, the Dane." And in the process he draws our attention to Hamlet's ambiguity as both active agent and passive instrument. For the effect of his apology is to transform Hamlet the agent, defined by and responsible for his own actions, into Hamlet the instrument, possessed by madness and victimized by actions he is compelled to perform. This ambiguity is to be sustained in the duel and brought to culmination in the murder of Claudius.

If Hamlet the revenging son is "not himself," neither is Hamlet the duelist, for the same actional reason. Since in dueling the ordinary free play of action is disciplined to the conventions of swordsmanship, the man turned duelist loses his individuality in his actional role—as, in a more complex fashion, the actor loses his individuality in his dramatic role. In the duel-drama metaphor, which many critics have noted, Hamlet enters a fictional world, an "as-if" world of bated foils in which fencers pretend to engage in real combat, and loses himself in a series of stylized actions. But of course Laertes is not "acting." Nor, once wounded, is Hamlet. In the form of the unbated foil, reality invades fiction. The illusion of play is shattered, fencing becomes fighting, and at the end Hamlet leaps from his role as duelist into his role as revenger, out of fiction into reality—like an actor leaping from the stage into the theater—to kill the most attentive member of his audience.
At last the deed we have awaited is performed, the promise fulfilled. And yet, is this really the deed we awaited? Why does Hamlet kill Claudius? To ask that question at this late date may seem odd, given all the motives for revenge Hamlet has catalogued throughout the play. But the point of asking it is that Hamlet does not kill Claudius as an act of revenge for his father.

When he cries, "The point envenom'd too! / Then, venom, to thy work" (V.ii.332-33), and thrusts at Claudius, it is not poison in the ear but venom on the sword tip that prompts Hamlet's attack. He kills Claudius, not for his father, but for himself, not in response to the Ghost's story and in fulfillment of his vow, but in direct retaliation for the attack upon his own life. Indeed, his stabbing of Claudius is less an act of revenge than a reflex action. Hamlet answers the thrust of Claudius's plot against him as he answered the thrust of Laertes' unbated foil, with a quick and fatal riposte.

There is another question to be asked: Why does Hamlet kill Claudius twice? For having already stabbed Claudius with a foil whose venomed point yields "not half an hour of life" (326), he then seizes the poisoned stoup of wine—

Here, thou incestuous, murderous, damned
Dane,
Drink off this potion! Is thy union here?
Follow my mother!

(336-38)

Whereas the venom on the unbated foil has been applied by Laertes (see IV.vii. 141-49), the stoup of wine has been poisoned by Claudius himself. Thus the stabbing has been poisioned by Claudius, though it involves poison, does not recall the original poisoning of Hamlet's father by Claudius but the poisoning of Hamlet himself, whereas just the reverse is true of Hamlet's forcing the poisoned wine upon Claudius. Thus if Hamlet stabs Claudius for himself, he forces the poisoned potion upon him for his father. The "union" is of course the pearl which Claudius dropped in the stoup of wine, but in its punning sense, as "marriage," it harks back to the poisoning of Hamlet's father, which enabled the poisoned marriage between Claudius and Gertrude. If the pearl is set in a ring which contains poison, in the Lucrezia Borgia style, then the "poisoned marriage" pun is perfected.

In having Hamlet kill Claudius twice, Shakespeare emblematizes, I think, two other "unions"—the union of Hamlet's previously divided identity and the union of Shakespeare's disjunctive dramatic structure. In the tmesislike structure of Hamlet the first killing of Claudius is a product, not of the beginning of the play, where Hamlet swore to revenge his father, but of the middle. It issues from that long digressive phase in which Hamlet, distracted from his generic task as revenger, reveals to us the unique workings of his tormented consciousness, the period in which he names himself. Had he killed Claudius merely as an act of revenge, the middle of the play would have been irrelevant indeed; and Hamlet's conversion from self to son would have been inexplicable and arbitrary. As it is, however, in acting for himself, Hamlet acts for a self that has been freighted with value and significance by virtue of that self-exploratory middle phase. Thus his self-revengeful killing of Claudius emphasizes the achievement of individuality that is a precondition of meaningful action in Hamlet.

If this first killing helps rescue the individual form of Shakespeare's play by binding the end to the middle, the second killing accedes to its generic form as revenge tragedy by binding the end to the beginning. For the second killing is performed by Hamlet the revenger fulfilling his vow to the Ghost, completing the initial "word" with a terminal "act." What has made Hamlet innovative as a revenge tragedy—a play uniquely itself within its genre—is its departure from the generic pattern in order to explore both the consciousness of its hero and the nature of its own form. By this means, both play and hero distinguish themselves from their patronyms, the ur-Hamlet and old Hamlet, and "name" themselves as discrete entities. Yet as part of the
paradox of the concrete-universal, individual fulfillment may coincide with generic achievement: self and son may interpenetrate. For the Hamlet who kills Claudius for himself kills him also for his father, rather like Fortinbras regaining his father's lands in Denmark by conquering for himself in Poland. Perhaps this gives additional point to Polonius's famous advice to sons:

This above all: to thine own self be true,
And it must follow, as the night the day,
Thou canst not then be false to any man.
(I.iii.78-80)

By exploring and naming the "I" in "Hamlet," then, the hero proves at the end not to have been false to old Hamlet, or to himself. By earning the name for himself, investing it with his own meaning, Hamlet has the more truly merited his father's legacy. The singular name is now a symbol for the fusion of self and son wrought by a final act that, in its doubleness, is at once individual and generic.

What applies in this regard to Hamlet applies also to Hamlet. Having gone its own self-defining route, the play nevertheless honors its genetic and generic obligations at the end, fulfilling the requirements of the revenge tragedy form, yet in the process compelling that universal form to make its way—hindered and diverted, its success in constant jeopardy—through the density of concrete experience. So wrought by its particular embodiment in this play, in this hero, the generic form is no longer what it was. It has been twisted, tested, and modified by a playwright who, in making the form answer to the needs of his original play, has revivified it as a genre. Thus Hamlet the hero and Hamlet the play have achieved the independence of "being" attached to proper names and at the same time the breadth of "meaning" possessed by common nouns. Both have truly named themselves.

Notes


I know that all language is abstract by nature and cannot deposit before us a concrete object, as Swift's *virtuosi* in the Grand Academy of Lagado could. Even the particularizing of "that man in the corner wearing a yellow tie" is accomplished with a series of abstract terms. Nevertheless, within its context of necessary abstraction, language can particularize things but not acts.

Harold Rosenberg distinguishes between "personality" (representing the felt unity of the evolving organism) and "identity" ("the character defined by the coherence of his acts") in his discussion of "Character Change in the Drama" (The Tradition of the New, 2nd ed. [New York: Horizon Press, 1960], pp. 135-53). See also,


would depart here from Neilson and Hill's text, which sets a comma after "Taint not thy mind" and continues "nor let thy soul contrive / Against thy mother aught," in favor of the semicolon that appears after "mind" in the Folio text. The difference is crucial, the comma making a less sweeping demand on Hamlet than the semicolon.

In "Hamlet When New" (SR, 61 [1953], 15-42), William Empson argues that Shakespeare has Hamlet almost ostentatiously call attention to his delay in order to intercept the audience's impulse to laugh at the revenge structure and to make theatricality itself one of the themes of the play.

For a brilliant discussion of various examples of "overspecified ends and indeterminate middles"—tmesis being one—which force upon us the act of interpretation, see Geoffrey Hartman, "The Voice of the Shuttle: Language from the Point of View of Literature," Beyond Formalism (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), pp. 337-55.


This notion of a shift is put forward by Rosenberg, who maintains that the self-exploring, inactive Hamlet is arbitrarily transformed into the revenger because the play must become a tragedy. Though I think that this is but part of the story, I am nevertheless indebted to Rosenberg's thoughtful discussion of this aspect of character change.

Rebecca Smith (essay date 1980)


[In the essay that follows, Smith contends that Shakespeare's Gertrude is not lascivious or deceitful, but rather submissive, compliant, nurturing, and caught in the struggle between her two loves, Hamlet and Claudius.]
Gertrude, in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, has traditionally been played as a sensual, deceitful woman. Indeed, in a play in which the characters’ words, speeches, acts, and motives have been examined and explained in myriad ways, the depiction of Gertrude has been remarkably consistent, as a woman in whom "compulsive ardure … actively doth burn, / And reason [panders] will" (III.iv. 86-88).\(^1\) Gertrude prompts violent physical and emotional reactions from the men in the play, and most stage and film directors—like Olivier, Kozintsev, and Richardson—have simply taken the men’s words and created a Gertrude based on their reactions. But the traditional depiction of Gertrude is a false one, because what her words and actions actually create is a soft, obedient, dependent, unimaginative woman who is caught miserably at the center of a desperate struggle between two "mighty opposites," her "heart cleft in twain" (III.iv.156) by divided loyalties to husband and son. She loves both Claudius and Hamlet, and their conflict leaves her bewildered and unhappy.

Three famous film versions of *Hamlet* illustrate the standard presentation, wherein Gertrude is a vain, self-satisfied woman of strong physical and sexual appetites. Thus, Grigori Kozintsev (1964) shows her gazing into a hand mirror and arranging her hair as she chastens Hamlet for the particularity of his grief in the face of the commonness of death. Tony Richardson (1969) repeatedly shows her eating and drinking. Jack Jorgensen’s description in *Shakespeare on Film* is vividly accurate: "Richardson’s film shows the bed as a ‘nasty sty’ where overweight Claudius and pallid Gertrude drink blood-red wine and feast with their dogs on greasy chicken and fruit."\(^2\) Gertrude sustains herself throughout the play with frequent goblets of greedily swilled wine.

In the same way, in the Olivier *Hamlet* (1948), the dramatic symbol for Gertrude is a luxurious canopied bed. This bed is one of the first and last images on the screen and emphasizes both Gertrude’s centrality in the play and Olivier’s interpretation of the centrality of sexual appetite in Gertrude’s nature. Even her relationship with her son is tinged with sexuality. Olivier’s Hamlet brutally hurls Gertrude—the ultimate sexual object—onto her bed, alternating embraces and abuse in the accusatory closet scene. In Richardson’s and Kozintsev’s film versions, the sexual passion between Claudius and Gertrude receives similarly emphatic treatment. For example, Richardson has Claudius and Gertrude conduct much royal business from their bed; and in one particularly obvious scene, Kozintsev’s Gertrude is led by Claudius through the midst of people scantily costumed as satyrs and nymphs and dancing in frenzied celebration. She is then literally pushed into a darkened room, whereupon Claudius moves toward her (and the camera) with a lustfully single-minded expression on his face. The misrepresentations that these film versions of Gertrude perpetuate take their cues from respected critical interpretations of Gertrude,\(^3\) which seem to assume that only a deceitful, highly sexual woman could arouse such strong responses and violent reactions in men, not a nurturant and loving one, as is Shakespeare’s Gertrude.

Gertrude, like Hamlet, is a character who undergoes subtle but significant changes between Shakespeare’s sources and his play, changes which increase her complexity and ambiguity. In the earliest Amleth/Hamlet stories, Gertrude clearly is culpable. In Saxo Grammaticus’s twelfth-century *Historiae Danicae*, Gerutha/Gertrude marries Feng/Claudius, who is the known murderer of her husband. François de Belleforest, in his sixteenth-century retelling of the story in the *Histoires Tragiques*, makes one important addition to the depiction of Gertrude: he states that the Queen committed adultery with her brother-in-law during her marriage to the King.\(^4\) Finally, in the *Ur-Hamlet*, significant actions by Gertrude reinforce the suspicion of her culpability: "After the death of Corambis (Polonius) she blames herself for Hamlet's madness, and believes that she is thereby punished for her incestuous re-marriage, or else that her marriage, by depriving Hamlet of the crown, has driven him mad from thwarted ambition. Hamlet upbraids her for her crocodile tears, and urges her to assist in his revenge, so that in the King’s death her infamy should die."\(^5\) In this earlier version, Gertrude promises to "conceale, consent, and doe my best / What stratagem soe're thou shalt devise," and she sends Hamlet warnings by Horatio, thus taking direct steps to aid Hamlet's revenge and thereby rid herself of guilt.\(^6\)
As Kenneth Muir points out, Shakespeare's play apparently follows the main lines of the Ur-Hamlet (with its secret murder, doubtable ghost, feigned and real madness, play-within-a-play, closet scene, killing of the Polonius/Corambis figure, voyage to England, suicide of Ophelia, and fencing match with Laertes—Shakespeare's additions including only the pirates, Fortinbras, and possibly the gravediggers). The changes that Shakespeare does make in the structure and characters of the play demand attention as significant indicators of a redirection that adds subtlety and thematic complexity: melodrama is replaced by tragedy. In Shakespeare's Hamlet, many questions about Gertrude arise that cannot be fully answered: the murder of old Hamlet is not public knowledge, but does Gertrude know, or at least suspect? Is she guilty of past adultery as well as current incest? Does the closet scene demonstrate her acknowledgment of sexual guilt, and does she thereafter align herself with Hamlet in his quest for revenge and thus shun Claudius's touch and bed?

Indeed, does Gertrude demonstrate change and development in the course of the play, or is she incapable of change?

Finding answers to these questions about Gertrude is complicated by the fact that in Hamlet one hears a great deal of discussion of Gertrude's personality and actions by other characters. She is a stimulus for and object of violent emotional reactions in the ghost, Hamlet, and Claudius, all of whom offer extreme descriptions of her. The ghost expresses simultaneous outrage, disgust, and protectiveness in his first appearance to Hamlet: "Let not the royal bed of Denmark be / A couch for luxury and damned incest. / But howsoever thou pursues this act, / Taint not thy mind, nor let thy soul contrive / Against thy mother aught" (I.v.82-86). The ghost first asks Hamlet for revenge, describes his present purgatorial state, spends ten lines sketchily outlining the secret murder, and then begins a vivid sixteen-line attack on the sexual relationship of Claudius and Gertrude (42-57). He returns to a brief description of the actual murder only because he "scent[s] the morning air, / Brief let me be" (58-59). Before he disappears, he returns to the topic of Gertrude's sexual misdeeds, but again admonishes Hamlet to "leave her to heaven." The ghost's second appearance to Hamlet is prompted by the need for further defense of Gertrude. Hamlet's resolution when he is preparing to visit his mother's bedchamber after "The Mousetrap," to "be cruel, not unnatural," to "speak [daggers] to her, but use none" (III.i.395-96), seems to be failing. His frenzied attack on Gertrude gains verbal force and violence (which, on stage, is usually accompanied by increasing physical force and violence) until the ghost intervenes. Hamlet shares the ghost's obsession with Gertrude's sexuality, but is dissipating the energy that should be directed toward avenging his father's murder in attacking Gertrude for, he claims, living "In the rank sweat of an ensemmed bed, / Stew'd in corruption, honeying and making love / Over the nasty sty!" (III.iv.93-95). The ghost must intervene to whet Hamlet's "almost blunted purpose" of revenge and to command Hamlet to protect Gertrude, to "step between her and her fighting soul," since "conceit in weakest bodies strongest works" (111-14).

Hamlet's violent emotions toward his mother are obvious from his first soliloquy, in which twenty-three of the thirty-one lines express his anger and disgust at what he perceives to be Gertrude's weakness, insensitivity, and, most important, bestiality: "O most wicked speed: to post / With such dexterity to incestuous [sic] sheets" (I.ii.156-57). Gertrude's apparent betrayal of his idealized Hyperion father, not the actual death, has given rise to Hamlet's melancholy state at the first of the play. A. C. Bradley's analysis of the cause of Hamlet's sickness of life and longing for death is vividly corroborative: "It was the moral shock of the sudden ghastly disclosure of his mother's true nature, falling on him when his heart was aching with love, and his body doubtless weakened by sorrow.... Is it possible to conceive an experience more desolating to a man such as we have seen Hamlet to be; and is its result anything but perfectly natural? It brings bewildered horror, then loathing, then despair of human nature."8

Later, when the ghost tells Hamlet that Claudius, Gertrude's second husband, is the murderer of her first, his generalized outrage at women increases and spreads. His sense of betrayal is soon further fed by the unexpected rejection of his love by Ophelia, who obeys the commands of her brother and father that result from their one-dimensional conception of a woman as a sexual "object." Laertes advises Ophelia that "best
safety lies in fear" (I.iii.43), and Polonius, in a mean-minded speech, demands her immediate rejection of
Hamlet's apparently "honorable" (111) espousals of love. To all of this, Ophelia replies, "I shall obey, my
lord" (136). Hereafter, Hamlet is described by Ophelia as behaving quite strangely (II.i.74-97), and he is heard
by the audience speaking to Ophelia abusively or coarsely, as he does to his mother. His experiences lead him
to attack what he perceives to be the brevity of women's love (I.ii.129-59; III. ii.154), women's wantonness
(III.i.145), and the ability that women have to make "monsters" of the men (III.i.138) over whom they have so
much power. Indeed, in the sea of troubles that may lead one to seek an end to life, "despis'd love" (III.i.71) is
fourth in the list of heartaches.

Claudius creates an impression of Gertrude for the audience because she is the object of violent conflicting
emotions for him as she is for the ghost and Hamlet. She is, he says, "My virtue or my plague" (IV.vii.13). He
suffers under a "heavy burthen" (III.i.53) of guilt, but he refuses to give up "those effects for which I did the
murther: / My crown, mine own ambition, and my queen" (III.i.54-55). He speaks respectfully to Gertrude
throughout the play, and tells Laertes that one of the reasons for his toleration of Hamlet's extraordinary
behavior is his love for Gertrude:

The Queen his mother
Lives almost by his looks, and for myself—
My virtue or my plague, be it either which—
She is so [conjunctive] to my life and soul,
That, as the star moves not but in his sphere,
I could not but by her.

(IV.vii.11-16)

In Belleforest's version of the Hamlet story, the Claudius figure kills the King ostensibly to save the life of the
Queen, his mistress. In Shakespeare's Hamlet, Gertrude's attractiveness for Claudius is one of the causes—and
his sexual possession of her one of the results—of the murder of old Hamlet. To possess Gertrude, Claudius is
brazenly willing to risk the displeasure of "the general gender" (IV.vii.18) who bear great love for young
Hamlet and does not hesitate to displace him on the throne by marrying Gertrude—"our sometime sister, now
our queen, /Th'imperial jointress to this warlike state" (I.i.8-9). Claudius is as obsessed by Gertrude as the
two Hamlets are, and—although he clearly loves her—he shares the Hamlets' conception of Gertrude as an
object. She is "possess'd" as one of the "effects" of his actions (III.iii.53-54) and is thereafter "Taken to wife"
(I.i.14). It may then seem contradictory that he does not forcibly stop Gertrude from drinking the poisoned
wine, but there are, in the context of the final scene of the play, many strong reasons for his self-restraint.
Therefore, one has no reason to assume that his lecture to Laertes on the ephemerality of love—which "Dies
in his own too much" (IV.vii.118)—arises out of his experiences with Gertrude.

Although she may have been partially responsible for Claudius's monstrous act of fratricide and although her
marriage to Claudius may have been indirectly responsible for making a "monster" of Hamlet, Gertrude is
never seen in the play inducing anyone to do anything at all monstrous. Jan Kott's assertion
notwithstanding—that Gertrude "has been through passion, murder, and silence. … suppressing] everything
inside her," so that one senses "a volcano under her superficial poise"—when one closely examines
Gertrude's actual speech and actions in an attempt to understand the character, one finds little that hints at
hypocrisy, suppression, or uncontrolled passion and their implied complexity.

Gertrude appears in only ten of the twenty scenes that comprise the play: furthermore, she speaks very little,
having less dialogue than any other major character in Hamlet She speaks—a mere of 4,042 (3.8 percent). She
speaks plainly, directly, and chastely when she does speak, using few images except in the longest of her
speeches, which refer to Hamlet's and Ophelia's relationship (III.i.36-41 and V.i.243-46), to Ophelia's death
(IV.vii. 166-83), to her sense of unspecified guilt (IV.v. 17-20), and to Hamlet's madness in the graveyard
(V.i.284-88). Gertrude tells Ophelia before the spying scene that she hopes that the "happy cause of Hamlet's
"wildness" is Ophelia's "good beauties." If so, she trusts that Ophelia's "virtues" can effect a cure (III.i.39-40); and later, when relaying the news of Ophelia's death, Gertrude characteristically disdains liberality and creates her bittersweet pictures in the language of the "cull-cold maids." Gertrude's brief speeches include references to honor, virtue, flowers, and a dove's golden couplets; neither structure nor content suggests wantonness.

Gertrude's only mildly critical comments are in response to the verbosity of Polonius ("More matter with less art"—II.ii.95) and that of the Player Queen ("The lady doth protest too much, methinks"—III.ii.230).

Gertrude usually asks questions (ten questions in her approximately forty-five lines of dialogue in the closet scene) or voices solicitude for the well-being and safety of other characters. She divides her concern between Claudius and Hamlet; indeed, Claudius observes that she "lives almost by his [Hamlet's] looks" (IV.vii.12). Her first speeches are to Hamlet, admonishing an end to his "particular" grief and pleading that he stay in Denmark with her: "Let not thy mother lose her prayers, Hamlet, / I pray thee stay with us, go not to Wittenberg" (I.ii.118-19). In her second appearance on stage, she directs Rosencrantz and Guildenstern "to visit / My too much changed son" (II.ii.35-36) in an attempt to discover the cause of his change. However, in the same scene she also demonstrates her perspicacity by intuitively, and correctly, analyzing Hamlet's behavior: "I doubt it is no other but the main, / His father's death and our [o'erhasty] marriage" (II.ii.56-57). Gertrude's dialogue gains atypical force when she must defend both Claudius (IV.v.10-11, 117, 129) and Hamlet (V.i.264, 273, 284-88) to Laertes, and in her desperate defense of Hamlet to Claudius when he asks of Hamlet's whereabouts after the murder of Polonius. Hamlet, she says, killed Polonius because of a "brainish apprehension" and "weeps for what is done" (IV.i.ill, 27).

Gertrude's actions are as solicitous and unlascivious as her language. She usually enters a scene with the King, and she is alone on stage only with Hamlet in the closet scene and with mad Ophelia (both times expressing feelings of some kind of guilt). She repeatedly leaves scenes after being ordered out by Claudius, which he does both to protect her from the discovery of his guilt and to confer with her privately about how to deal with Hamlet. Little proof for the interpretation of Gertrude as a guileful and carnal woman emerges from her other textually implicit actions, as, for example, when she sorrowfully directs the attention of Polonius and Claudius to Hamlet: "But look where sadly the poor wretch comes reading" (II.ii.168).

She acquiesces in the plan to determine the cause of Hamlet's extraordinary behavior by spying on him, using Ophelia as a decoy, and leaves when ordered to, so the plan can be carried out, saying, "And for your part, Ophelia, I do wish / That your good beauties be the happy cause / Of Hamlet's wildness. So shall I hope your virtues / Will bring him to his wonted way again, / To both your honors" (III.i.36-41). She later sends messengers to Hamlet to bring him to her after "The Mousetrap" and attempts to deal roundly with him, but she is forced to sit down and to contrast the pictures of her first husband and Claudius (III.iv.34, 53). Even after her encounter with Hamlet in the closet scene, she apparently attempts to restrain Laertes physically when he madly bursts in to accuse Claudius of killing Polonius ("Let him go, Gertrude, do not fear our person" IV.v.123). She accepts a sprig of rue from Ophelia, to be worn "with a difference" (IV.v.183), and later scatters flowers on Ophelia's grave. It also is observable from the text that she offers Hamlet a napkin with which to wipe his face during the fencing match and wipes his face for him once. Finally, and most important, she drinks the poisoned wine and dies onstage, using her dying words to warn Hamlet of the poison (V.ii.291, 309-10), but not accusing Claudius. Although both the ghost and Hamlet repeatedly speak in vivid language of her gamboling between incestuous sheets (and presumably she does sometimes share a bed with Claudius), the text never states or implies that Gertrude gives or receives the wanton pinches or "reechy kisses" (III.iv.183-84) that so obsess, enrage, and disgust the imaginations of Hamlet and the ghost.

Her own words and actions compel one to describe Gertrude as merely a quiet, biddable, careful mother and wife. Nonetheless, one can still examine Gertrude's limited actions and reactions to answer the knotty interpretative question of Gertrude's culpability in the murder of her first husband. When speaking to Hamlet, the ghost does not state or suggest Gertrude's guilt in his murder, only in her "falling-off" from him to Claudius (I.v.47). When Hamlet confronts her after "The Mousetrap," she asks in apparent innocence, "What have I done, that thou dar'st wag thy tongue / In noise so rude against me?" (III.iv.39-40). She has not been
verbally guileful before, so one has no reason to suspect her of duplicity in this instance. And when Hamlet informs her that old Hamlet was murdered by Claudius, she does not indicate prior knowledge. Instead, she exclaims in horror, "As kill a King!" (30), and pleads for the third time that Hamlet mitigate his attack: "No more!" (101). She is not aware of any personal guilt, and she does not want to hear of the guilty deeds of one of the men she loves.

Clearly, Gertrude's innocence of involvement in the murder is most strongly suggested. However, many critics have interpreted the text differently, asserting that at the least Gertrude is guilty of having had a sexual relationship with Claudius before the murder of her husband because the ghost uses the word adulterate when describing Claudius and asserts, in reference to Gertrude, that "[lust], though to a radiant angel link'd, / Will [sate] itself in a celestial bed / And prey on garbage" (I.v.55-57). But if Gertrude had been involved in an adulterous affair with Claudius, she would surely have known that she was "conjunctive" to his "life and soul" and that he was ambitious. She might therefore have suspected him to be capable of murder in order to obtain her and the crown (which a marriage to her would assure him), but she has no such suspicions. The ghost does use the past tense to describe Claudius's and Gertrude's sexual liaison. Claudius "won to his shameful lust" Gertrude's will: "O Hamlet, what [a] falling-off was there" (45-47, emphasis added). Still, it is not clear if the ghost is referring to a time before his murder or if the past to which he refers is that period since his death, during which Claudius has won and married Gertrude. Hamlet's anger and disgust at Gertrude's hasty marriage and the dexterity with which she moved to "incestious sheets"—feelings expressed even before he had talked with the ghost or knew of the murder—further support the interpretation that Gertrude was not guilty of a sexual liaison with Claudius before her husband's murder, but that her hasty, apparently careless betrayal of the memory of her first husband is what, in Hamlet's eyes, "makes marriage vows / As false as dicers' oaths" (III.iv.44-45). Indeed, in the closet scene Hamlet never accuses her of adultery, but abhors her choice of an "adulterate" second husband: "Could you on this fair mountain leave to feed, / And batten on this moor? … what judgment / Would step from this to this?" (67-71).

Although Gertrude is not an adulterer, she has been "adulterated" by her contact, even innocently in marriage, with Claudius. Similarly, his crimes and deceit have, in fact, made Gertrude guilty of incest. In order to marry, Claudius and Gertrude would have been required to obtain a dispensation to counteract their canonical consanguinity or affinity. Obviously, if his crime of fratricide were publicly known—as it is by the ghost and Hamlet—Claudius's dispensation to marry his victim's wife, his sister-in-law, certainly would not have been granted. Therefore, one could assert that the relationship between Claudius and Gertrude is incestuous because the dispensation was based on false pretenses and would not have been granted if the truth were known. Because they know the truth, the ghost and Hamlet persist in terming the relationship incestuous; but Gertrude has married in innocence and good faith, not as a party to the deception.

Gertrude does readily admit her one self-acknowledged source of guilt—that her marriage was "o'erhasty," but in all other instances she feels guilt only after Hamlet has insisted that she be ashamed. And it is not ever completely clear to what Gertrude refers in the closet scene when she mentions the black spots on her soul—if it is a newly aroused awareness of her adulterate and incestuous relationship, if it is her marriage to a man whom Hamlet so clearly despises, or if it is merely her already lamented o'erhasty marriage:

O Hamlet, speak no more!
Thou turn'st my [eyes into my very] soul,
And there I see such black and [grained] spots
As will [not] leave their tinct.
(III.iv. 88-91)

Hamlet's violent cajolery in the closet scene has created unaccustomed feelings of guilt in this accommodating woman, who wants primarily to please him. However, she has not pleased Hamlet by acting in a way that pleased Claudius—by marrying him so soon after her husband's death and in spite of their consanguinity. For
Hamlet, her act "roars so loud and thunders in the index" (III.iv.52), and his displeasure has "cleft" the Queen's heart "in twain" (156) because she obviously loves both Hamlet and Claudius and feels pain and guilt at her inability to please both.

Hamlet is commanded by the ghost to moderate his attack, to "step between her and her fighting soul" because of Gertrude's "amazement" and because of the force of imagination in a weak body (III.iv.112-14). It is even possible that Gertrude's "fighting soul" results not only from an awakened sense of guilt at Hamlet's words but also from the conflict between her persistent, extreme love for her son and her momentary terror of him. After all, in the preceding 115 lines, Hamlet has certainly demonstrated emotional, and probably physical, brutality toward Gertrude; indeed, she has called for help in fear that he will murder her (21). Hamlet has stabbed Polonius and shown little remorse, and he continues the extraordinary behavior that prompts her amazement:

Alas, how is't with you,
That you do bend your eye on vacancy,
And with th' incorporai air do hold discourse?
Forth at your eyes your spirits wildly peep,
And as the sleeping soldiers in th' alarm,
Your bedded hair, like life in excrements,
Start up and stand an end. O gentle son,
Upon the heat and flame of thy distemper
Sprinkle cool patience. Whereon do you look?

(III.iv. 116-24).

Since the beginning of the play, Hamlet has been obsessed with Claudius's and Gertrude's guilt, and it is this which precipitates his distempered behavior. Indeed, judged without Hamlet's strong predisposition, Gertrude's behavior at "The Mousetrap" would lead no one to believe that she has seen herself reflected in the Player Queen. However, Hamlet believes that she has—and Hamlet is a powerful first-person force in the play who encourages one to see all events and people from his perspective, nearly compelling one to see Gertrude's one-line response to the play's action as an admission of guilt: "The lady doth protest too much, methinks" (III.ii.230). Gertrude's remark at this play-within-the-play can be given another interpretation that may be more accurate, in view of Gertrude's accommodating, dependent personality: her words are not a guileful anticipation and deflection of comparisons between herself and the Player Queen. Instead, being a woman of so few words herself, Gertrude must sincerely be irritated by the Player Queen's verbosity, just as she was earlier by that of Polonius. Obviously, Gertrude believes that quiet women best please men, and pleasing men is Gertrude's main interest. Indeed, Gertrude's concern to maintain a strong relationship with two men is demonstrated by her only other lines at the play—brief lines—asking her "dear Hamlet" to sit beside her (108) and voicing distress for Claudius's obvious consternation at the end of the play: "How fares my lord?" (267). After the play, Gertrude is, according to Guildenstern, "in most great affliction of spirit" (311-12) and calls Hamlet for a chastening session in her room for two reasons: the conference, with Polonius as spy, had already been planned before the presentation of the play; and more important, she is quite upset because one of the men for whom she cares greatly has "much offended" (III.iv.9) the other. In no way, by word or act, does she indicate that the play has spontaneously created any sense of guilt in her.

Obviously, this analysis of Gertrude's behavior does not suggest any changes or clear moral development in her. After the play-within-the-play and the closet scene, Gertrude agrees to Hamlet's request that she not "ravel all this matter out," since he is "essentially … not in madness, / But mad in craft" (III.iv.186-88). She says, "I have no life to breathe / What thou has said to me" (198-99). And she is true to her word. She does not unravel it to Claudius, whom Hamlet hates and fears. However, she is immediately seen in the next scene telling Claudius of something else—the murder of Polonius—and defending Hamlet in his apparent madness; and although she is true to Hamlet, the scene nonetheless works to undercut her position as an honest woman. That Gertrude does not promise Hamlet to refrain from going to Claudius's bed may possibly suggest an
admission of guilt about the relationship. Those who claim that Gertrude does admit to committing adultery and incest cite her one self-revealing aside, four lines in which she directly grieves for her sinful, sick soul and self-destructive, fearful guilt:

To my sick soul, as sin's true nature is,
Each toy seems prologue to some great amiss,
So full of artless jealousy is guilt,
It spills itself in fearing to be spilt.

(IV. v. 17-20)

But the nature of this lamented guilt remains unclear; it is apparently unfelt until aroused by Hamlet's attack. If it arises out of the conflict between her love for Claudius and her remorse for betraying the memory of her first husband, she obviously chooses, like Claudius, to "retain th'offense" (III.iii.56), because she soon thereafter tries physically and verbally to protect Claudius from Laertes.

Gertrude has not moved in the play toward independence or a heightened moral stance, only her divided loyalties and her unhappiness intensify. Given the presentation of Gertrude in Shakespeare's text, it is impossible to see the accuracy of Olivier's and Kozintsev's film presentations and of many stage depictions that show Gertrude shrinking after Act Three from Claudius's touch because of her newly awakened sense of decency and shame. Nor does the text suggest, as Olivier does in his film, that she is suspicious of the pearl that Claudius drops in Hamlet's wine goblet. Gertrude does not drink the wine to protect Hamlet or to kill herself because of her shame; she drinks it in her usual direct way to toast Hamlet's success in the fencing match, after first briskly and maternally advising him to wipe his face. In fact, Gertrude's death is symbolic of the internal disharmony caused by her divided loyalties. In order to honor Hamlet, she directly disobeys Claudius for the first time:

QUEEN. The Queen carouses to thy fortune,
Hamlet.
HAMLET. Good Madam!
KING. Gertrude, do not drink.
QUEEN. I will, my lord, I pray you pardon me.
KING. [Aside.] It is the pois'ned cup, it is too late.

(V.ii.289-92)

Gertrude dies asserting that she is poisoned and calling out for her "dear Hamlet," but still not attacking Claudius.

Gertrude's words and actions in Shakespeare's Hamlet create not the lusty, lustful, lascivious Gertrude that one generally sees in stage and film productions but a compliant, loving, unimaginative woman whose only concern is pleasing others: a woman who seemed virtuous (I.V.46), and who would, so Hamlet asserts, hang on her first husband, "As if increase of appetite had grown / By what it fed on" (I.ii. 143-45). This same careful woman, soon after her husband's death, "with remembrance of herself (7), marries his brother—probably because of her extremely dependent personality—and tries to relieve her much-loved son's melancholy by counseling him in temporality: "Thou know'st 'tis common, all that lives must die, / Passing through nature to eternity" (72-73). As these and most of her other lines demonstrate, Gertrude may be the object of violent emotions, but she displays no passion, only quietly consistent concern for the well-being of the two other characters: Claudius and, most profoundly, Hamlet. She is easily led, and she makes no decisions for herself except, ironically, the one that precipitates her death. Her personality is, both figuratively and literally, defined by other characters in the play. Because of her malleability and weakness, the distorted image created and reflected by others—not the one created by her own words and actions—has predominated.
In creating Gertrude, Shakespeare clearly diverged from the sources he followed quite closely in other areas, making her of a piece with the rest of the play—that is, problematic. But Gertrude is problematic not because of layers of complexity or a dense texture such as that of Hamlet but because, as with the ghost, Shakespeare does not provide all the "answers," all the necessary clues that would allow one to put together her character and fully understand her speech, actions, and motivations. Still, Gertrude is not a flat, uninteresting character as a result of her limited range of responses and concerns. Gertrude's words and acts interest the audience because, obviously, she is of extreme interest to the combatants in the play—the ghost, Hamlet and Claudius—all of whom see her literally and in quite heightened terms as a sexual object. However, if she were presented on stage and film as only her own words and deeds create her, Gertrude might become another stereotypical character: the nurturing, loving, careful mother and wife—malleable, submissive, totally dependent, and solicitous of others at the expense of herself. This is still a stereotype, but a more positive one than that of the temptress and destroyer—self-indulgent and soulless. And certainly it more accurately reflects the Gertrude that Shakespeare created.

Notes


3 The "received" critical opinion of Gertrude is most clearly stated by Ernest Jones, *Hamlet and Oedipus* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1954). He says that the Queen's "markedly sensual nature … is indicated in too many places in the play to need specific reference, and is generally recognized" (p. 91). Other influential critics have interpreted her similarly. A. C. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy* (London: Macmillan, 1956), says that the "ghastly disclosure" of Gertrude's true nature is a moral shock to Hamlet. She marries Claudius not for state reasons or out of family affection; instead, her marriage shows "an astounding shal-lowness of feeling [and] an eruption of coarse sensuality, 'rank and gross,' speeding posthaste to its horrible delight" (pp. 118-20). H. D. F. Kitto, *Form and Meaning in Drama* (1956), rpt. in part in *Shakespeare Criticism: 1935-1960*, ed. Anne Ridler (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), states that "a mad passion … swept [Gertrude] into the arms of Claudius" (p. 158). Similarly, L. C. Knights, *An Approach to "Hamlet"* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1961), describes the court's qualities as "coarse pleasures," "moral obtuseness," "sycophancy," "base and treacherous plotting," and "brainless triviality": "This is the world that revolves round the middle-aged sensuality of Claudius and Gertrude" (p. 42). Harry Levin, *The Question of Hamlet* (London: Oxford University Press, 1959), contrasts Ophelia (virginal, "faithful daughter and sister") to Gertrude (adulterous, corrupted, "faithless mother and wife") who is "associated with the artificial enticement of cosmetics" (p. 66). J. Dover Wilson, *What Happens in Hamlet* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1935), insists that Hamlet knows that Gertrude is "a criminal, guilty of the filthy sin of incest," and finally comes to see her "as rotten through and through" (p. 44). And, in the same vein, E. M. W. Tillyard, *Shakespeare's Problem Plays* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1968), comments on the "lascivious and incestuous guilt of Gertrude" which has "made the world ugly" for Hamlet (pp. 21-22).

In contrast, it is interesting to note that some earlier women writers have been more generous to Gertrude. Consider the evaluation by Lillie Buffum Chace Wyman in an appendix to *Gertrude of Denmark: An Interpretive Romance* (Boston: Marshall Jones, 1924), p. 238. Wyman says, "The critics have generally denounced Gertrude's second marriage as sinful in its very nature. It is rather absurd to echo Hamlet so completely as to this. Such an opinion certainly has been very dominant in some ages and some countries. It is doubtful, however, whether it was ever so universally an accepted belief as to make it certain that Shakespeare intended that such a mountain of odium should be heaped upon her, as writers have been piling up for centuries. In this connection, it may be noted that the Roman Catholic Church upheld the marriage of Katharine to Henry the Eighth. And certainly Shakespeare, however Anglican he may have been personally,
did not represent Katharine as a loathsome creature in his drama on that subject, and he did permit Henry's
courtiers to jeer at the King's pretence of scruple." Rosamond Putzel in "Queen Gertrude's Crime,
Renaissance Papers, 1961, ed. George Walton Williams (Durham, N.C.: Southeastern Renaissance
Conference, 1962), pp. 37-46, argues that the evidence in the play does not prove that Gertrude committed
adultery and that her characterization suggests that she did not.

4 Saxo Grammaticus, Amleth, and F. de Belleforest, The Hystorie of Hamblet, Prince of Denmarke, in Hamlet,

5 Kenneth Muir, Shakespeare's Sources (London: Methuen, 1961), p. 112. See also

6 Muir, Shakespeare's Sources, p. 112.

7 Ibid., p. 114. See also

8 Bradley, Shakespearean Tragedy, pp. 118-19.


10 Line counts and percentage from Marvin Spevack, A Complete and Systematic Concordance to the Works

11 The adjective adulterate denotatively refers to something that makes other things inferior, impure, or
corrupted by its addition and need not be limited to a specific reference to sexual intercourse between a
married person and someone who is not that person's spouse. Bertram Joseph, Conscience and the King
(London: Chatto and Windus, 1953), defines adulterate by reference to Renaissance sources, namely, Thomas
Wilson, who states in his Christian Dictionary (1612) that adultery means "all manner of uncleanness, about
desire of sex, together with occasion, causes, and means thereof, as in the 7th Commandment," and Perkins,
who says in A Golden Chain (1616) that adultery means "as much as to do anything, what way so ever," that
stains one's own chastity or that of another. Joseph also quotes from the homily "Against Whoredom and
Uncleanness" in Certain Sermons or Homilies (1623), which defines adultery as "all unlawful use of those
parts, which be ordained for generation" (p. 17). Clearly, the ghost's use of the word adulterate may refer to
Claudius's impurity resulting from his lust for Gertrude and the corruption that he spreads to Gertrude when
she becomes his wife, not necessarily to a sexual liaison between the two before old Hamlet's murder.

349-64, for a thorough analysis of the sixteenth-century religious controversy on consanguineous marriages.

13 It is significant that without Hamlet's guidance, Gertrude herself lacks conscious awareness of guilt.
Shakespeare may thus demonstrate in Gertrude the commonplace judgment of his society that women must
rely on men for guidance and support. Richard Hooker, for example, speaks of the giving of women in
marriage as a customary reminder of "the very imbecility of their nature and sex" which "doth bind them to be
always directed, guided and ordered by others … "; see his Of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity, V. lxxiii. 5
(London: Dent, 1954), II, p. 393. Such conventional assumptions about female "imbecility" may help to
explain both Hamlet's anger at Gertrude and the ghost's charity toward her. However, as Carolyn Heilbrun has
pointed out, Gertrude is no imbecile. While Heilbrun accepts the ghost's description of Gertrude as lustful, she
urges that the Queen "is also intelligent, penetrating, and gifted with a remarkable talent for concise and pithy

Kenneth Muir (essay date 1993)
Hamlet receives two commands from the Ghost: to kill Claudius, and not to harm Gertrude. As he cannot do the first without causing agony to his mother, he is given an apparently impossible task. It is therefore arguable—and it has been argued powerfully—that Hamlet did not really delay in carrying out his task. As soon as the guilt of Claudius is proclaimed publicly by Laertes, and Gertrude has declared that she has been poisoned by the cup intended for her son, Hamlet immediately executes justice on his uncle, while he himself is dying from the poisoned rapier. His mission has been accomplished, despite the fates of Rosencrantz, Guildenstern, Polonius and Ophelia, without deadly sin, and without harming his mother.

Nevertheless, most critics insist that Hamlet did delay, referring both to the Ghost's accusation of his 'almost blunted purpose', to Hamlet's refusal to kill the King at his prayers, and to his frequent self-accusations. Freud, followed by Jones, put forward one of the most popular explanations of the delay, that Hamlet was in love with his mother and that he was inhibited from killing his rival. This theory of Oedipus Complex has had a remarkable success, especially in the theatre, where we often see Gertrude's closet transformed into a bedroom, and where we see the relationship between Hamlet and his mother erotically charged.

It was outside Freud's terms of reference to consider the way in which Shakespeare was hemmed in by theatrical restraints. He had to provide suitable parts for his fellows; and, in rewriting a play which had been popular for a dozen years, his main purpose would be to play variations on an old theme. He knew that his audience would expect him to put new wine into old bottles. He had to dramatize the basic conflict between instinct and the moral law, and in this respect the play reveals the quintessential dilemma of the avenger. There were several variations on the basic theme. One of Tourneur's avengers left vengeance to God; one of Chapman's challenges his enemy to a duel and kills him in fair fight; Vindice in The Revenger's Tragedy becomes almost as evil as his victim. Shakespeare's solution was central in that he introduced four other avengers into his play (Laertes, Fortinbras, Pyrrhus, Lucianus) and his hero stands out as a civilized man among barbarians.

Apart from the relationship of Hamlet to the genre of revenge tragedy to which it belongs, there are other ways in which Freud's interpretation should be open to scrutiny. Two of these have been raised by other critics. First, it has been pointed out that readers and critics tend to identify with the hero, and when they analyse his character they ignore his particular situation and seem to be looking in a mirror. Coleridge, who attributed Hamlet's delay to his losing the power of action in the energy of resolve, confessed that he 'had a smack of Hamlet himself'. Other critics saddle Hamlet with their own prepossessions, so that their theories are only too predictable. It would have been easy to forecast Freud's theory before he committed it to paper. This does not disprove it, but it should make us wary.

The second reason for caution is that any theory which claims to be exclusively true is bound to be limiting. There are many other explanations of Hamlet's delay, advanced by notable critics, which are believed by many to be true, and which may at least be partially true, or an aspect of truth. Interpretations of any great play vary from one generation to another, even from one production to another. In the space of a few years after 1923 it was possible to see at the Old Vic three great Hamlets (Ernest Milton, Ion Swinley, John Gielgud). They were all different, but they were all based squarely on the texts, and all three gave convincing interpretations. What is true of performances is true of interpretations by critics. It is now universally agreed that there are several valid interpretations of most of Shakespeare's plays, and that the poet himself incorporated the conflicting impressions which rendered this inevitable. In some cases, indeed, he cut out passages which have been the cornerstone of some interpretations. Olivier's film was based on a speech that had been cut from the First Folio text.
At least one performance of *Troilus and Cressida* in Shakespeare's time ended heroically with the line

> Hope of revenge shall hide our inward woe.

Another version ended with Pandaras' obscene and satirical epilogue. It is obvious, therefore, that to take Oedipus Complex as the sole key to Hamlet's character is to undervalue the complexity of the play, as Freud himself partially realized, and to ignore the instability of Shakespeare's texts.

The third reason for caution is the fact that another important Freudian concept, that of the superego, is also relevant to Hamlet, as I hope to show. The superego is not merely the source of our finest thoughts, our idealisms and aspirations, but also of our profound feelings of guilt, our knowledge, in Scriptural terms, that we are all unprofitable servants. The superego is both 'High Priest and Police Agent', the image of the desirable and the propagator of taboos and prohibitions. It stands for inexorable law which condemns the cowering ego with such ferocity that it leads the victim to melancholia, and sometimes to suicide.

Does not this remind us of the Prince of Denmark? He too is a man picked out of ten thousand for his honesty (2.2.178); a beautiful pure and most moral nature; one who his mother to forgive him his virtue (3.4.152-3); one who idolizes his father, despite the Ghost's confession of foul crimes (1.5.12); one who eulogizes Horatio (3.2.56ff.), Laertes (5.1.217), and even the tough bandit, Fortinbras, as a 'delicate and tender prince' (4.4.48, omitted in F"). He has shared the view of Pico della Mirandola of man's godlike potentialities (4.2.203ff.), but is now utterly disillusioned. On his first appearance, the frailty of his mother makes him contemplate suicide, and reject it only because of the canon against self-slaughter (1.2.131-2). He longs for death, calling it a consummation devoutly to be wished (3.1.63-4). He confesses that he has lost all his mirth, and that he regards the earth as a sterile promontory, the firmament as a foul and pestilent congregation of vapours (2.2.293ff.). He asks the girl he loves why she wishes to be a breeder of sinners, and tells her (3.1.121ff.)

> I am myself indifferent honest, but yet I could accuse me of such things, that it were better my mother had not borne me … What should such fellows as I do crawling between earth and heaven? We are arrant knaves, all; believe none of us.

His love for Ophelia is tainted by his own sense of guilt, as well as by the frailty of women. He despises himself for not avenging his father's death and for 'the heroism of moral vacillation' which he stigmatizes as cowardice. Whether he kills Claudius or not he is doomed by his superego to blame himself. He is a classic example of the devastating effects on a sensitive spirit of the terrible cruelty of the superego.

Freud regarded the superego as the result of Oedipus Complex, but it is surely plain that the superego is more important in the interpretation of *Hamlet*.

Notes

1 For many years editors regarded a discussion of Hamlet's delay as an essential part of their task.

2 These can all be explained away as symptoms of Hamlet's neurosis. As the Ghost is invisible to Gertrude, his words may be Hamlet's unconscious inventions.

3 C. S. Lewis, in his brilliant British Academy lecture, gave several examples of this tendency; but he did not realize that his own portrait of Hamlet as Everyman, burdened with Original Sin, was a reflection of his own theological views.

4 It would be absurd to dismiss the views of Coleridge, Bradley, Shaw, Alexander and Levin, to name no others; and more wayward interpretations have occasional insights.
This point may have been made before, but I have not yet found an example.

have borrowed some phrases from Terry Eagleton's chapter on Freud in *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (1990), published after this article was drafted.

Goethe's description in *Wilhelm Meister*.

Editors gloss the foul crimes as minor imperfections. This was not the Ghost's opinion.

The phrase is Lascelles Abercrombie's.

Less sensitive spirits (Laertes, Pyrrhus and Fortinbras) seem not to be troubled by the superego.

Elio J. Frattaroli in a recent article (Int. Rev. Psycho-Anal. xvii (1990), 269-85) discusses the aesthetic response to *Hamlet*, based avowedly on R. Waelder's concept of the superego, but he does not relate it to the character of the hero.

**Hamlet (Vol. 35): Imagery**

Robert Tracy (essay date 1963)


[In the following essay originally presented as a lecture in 1963, Tracy comments on the symbolism of both chastity and sensual love associated with Ophelia's character.]

It is a critical commonplace to discern a pattern in Ophelia's apparently random remarks during her mad scenes. While suggesting complete mental derangement, Shakespeare advances the play by giving us a very clear indication of the reasons for Ophelia's madness: her irreconcilable attachments to Hamlet and Polonius as persons, and to chastity and sensual love as desirable goals. It is the strain of attempting to reconcile these opposing allegiances that has shattered her reason, for during the mad scenes Ophelia's lips involuntarily repeat the slogans and war cries of that great battle of conflicting loyalties from which her conscious mind has withdrawn itself. Her songs in Act IV, scene v, are concerned with the loss both of Hamlet and of Polonius, and with virginity and its sacrifice to sensual love.

One passage in the scene seems to break the pattern, however. The King enters as she sings of Polonius' death and asks, "How do you, pretty lady?" Ophelia's reply is, "Well, God dild you! They say the owl was a baker's daughter. Lord, we know what we are, but know not what we may be. God be at your table!" "Conceit upon her father", is the King's terse—and mistaken—interpretation of her words. Ophelia's next remark can be taken as a correction of the King's gloss, for she says, "Pray, let's have no words of this; but when they ask you what it means, say you this." Then she sings "Tomorrow is Saint Valentine's day", a song about the loss of virginity which appears to be a gloss on her enigmatic remark about the owl and the baker's daughter.

Modern editors of *Hamlet* have ignored this hint, however, and chosen instead an explanation which makes the remark irrelevant and quite out of tune with the rest of the scene. This explanation, found in all modern editions of the play, suggests that Ophelia is referring to a folktale about a baker's daughter who was punished for denying bread to Christ. Kittredge, quoting from Douce, gives the legend as follows:
Our Saviour went into a baker's shop where they were baking, and asked for some bread to eat. The mistress of the shop immediately put a piece of dough into the oven to bake for him; but was reprimanded by her daughter, who insisting that the piece of dough was too large, reduced it to a very small size. The dough, however, immediately afterwards began to swell, and presently became of a most enormous size. Whereupon, the baker's daughter cried out, 'Heugh, heugh, heugh,' which owl-like noise probably induced our Saviour for her wickedness to transform her into that bird. This story is often related to children, in order to deter them from such illiberal behavior to poor people.

But why should Ophelia allude to this tale at this time? She has not been stingy, nor is she a victim of divine wrath. We may quickly discard Claudius' explanation; his attention has been caught by the word daughter, and so he puts the remark down to filial grief. He cannot understand the complexity of reasons for her derangement. But we must also discard Douce's two-hundred-and-fifty-year-old false lead about Christ and the baker's daughter if we are to grasp the point of Ophelia's remark, and its relevance to the rest of the play, and we must re-examine the possible contextual relevance of the owl and the baker's daughter.

The owl is here for two reasons. The bird is, of course, a common omen of night, of evil, and especially of death. It can thus be considered as relevant to Ophelia's just-completed song about death and the grave, and so to the death of Polonius. But this is only a partial explanation. Ophelia has already begun to change her subject from death to "true-love" at the end of her song:

White his shroud as the mountain snow—
Larded all with sweet flowers;
Which bewept to the grave did not go
With true-love showers.

The white shroud suggests virginity as well as death; so do the "sweet flowers". The "grave" is a common term for bed in Elizabethan literature, just as death is a common term for sexual intercourse. Thus the song delicately shifts from a suggestion of Ophelia's grief at the double loss of Hamlet and Polonius to a suggestion of her disappointment at Hamlet's failure to take her "to the grave". The end of the song is thus a preface for the franker treatment of the same subject of sensual love in the Saint Valentine's Day song, a few moments later.

The mention of the owl is a part of the subtle introduction of this subject, for along with its other associations the owl was often a symbol of virginity, probably because of its association with the virgin goddess, Athena-Minerva. Athena, the "unconquer'd Virgin", was a favorite Renaissance symbol for "Chaste austerity … Saintly chastity" (Comus, 446-455), as we see her in Perugino's Combat of Love and Chastity, where Diana and Minerva battle against Venus and Cupid. In literature there are a few examples of the owl, her sacred bird, playing the same symbolic role. In The Owl and the Nightingale, the owl cites her own asceticism and accuses the nightingale of singing wantonly amatory songs, which corrupt the young and lead them to unchastity and lust (lines 894-902). Elsewhere the owl's conventional role as herald of the night and omen of ill-fortune and death is reinforced by its association with virginity and the loss of virginity. In Ovid's Metamorphoses (X, 452-453), for example, an owl shrieks thrice when Myrrha, in the grip of an unnatural passion for her father, Cinyras, hurries to give herself to him. What seems a mere evil omen reveals itself on closer inspection as a possible commentary on the action. Shakespeare has an owl shriek when Venus aggressively seduces Adonis (1. 531), and another is heard as Tarquin rises from his bed and creeps toward Lucrece (1. 165). The owl's connection with virginity and its loss is quite explicit in the Welsh belief that the owl's hooting warns not only of death, but often of some village maiden's loss of virginity. The hooting signals the exact moment of such an occurrence.1
If the owl suggests one of Ophelia's concerns, virginity, the "baker's daughter" suggests another, sensuality and harlotry. Laertes and Polonius have both warned her against the loss of virginity and its consequences, Hamlet has ordered her to a nunnery, and the remark indicates that all three speakers have impressed her. For to the Elizabethans, bakers' daughters were prostitutes. The association of trades stemmed from ancient Rome, where

the alicariae, or [female] bakers, were women of the street who waited for fortune at the doors of bakeries, especially those which sold certain cakes … destined for offerings to Venus … on … certain festivals, the master bakers… sold nothing but sacrificial breads, and at the same time they had slave girls or servant maids who prostituted themselves day and night in the bakery.\(^2\)

Shakespeare may have known of this association of bakers' daughters with prostitution from Plautus' Poenulus, where the prostitute Adelphasium classes the alicariae among the common whores (I. ii. 53-55). Bakers, bakers' wives, and bakeries retained a reputation for bawdiness even in Renaissance Rome, as the characters of Arcolano and Togna indicate in Aretino's comedy, La Cortigiana (1525). Shakespeare need not have looked so far afield, however. Less than fifty years before Hamlet was written, the term baker's daughters seems to have meant loose women to the citizens of Tudor London. During the brief reign of Mary I we find a certain John Bradford writing to the Lords of the Council to accuse her unpopular consort, Philip of Spain, of treason and of unchastity:

ye wyll crown him to make him lyve chaste, contrarye to his nature: for paradventure, after he wer crowned, he woulde be content with one woman, but in the mean space he muste have iiij or iiiij in one nyght, to prove which of them he lyketh best; not of ladyes and jentyllwomen, but of bakers doughters, and suche poore whores: wherupon they have a certayne saying, The baker's doughter is better in her goune, than Quene Mary wythout the crowne?\(^3\)

It probably also explains the fate of the "dowlas" shirts made for Falstaff by Mistress Quickly: "I have given them away to baker's wives."

Once we realize what Shakespeare meant to suggest by Ophelia's reference to the owl and the baker's daughter, the sense of the passage and its relevance to the rest of the play become clearer. Ophelia is commenting on appearance and reality, the apparently virtuous woman who is really a whore. She thus echoes Hamlet's central obsession with seems. More specifically, she dwells on Hamlet's charge that she is a whore and that her father is a "fishmonger", or employer of prostitutes. She is also probably dwelling on the change from maid to harlot which is the subject of her song a few moments later. The owl, seemingly a symbol of virtue but actually unchaste, hints at Hamlet's earlier anger at Ophelia, at his remarks on the Queen, and at the "paradox" which is proved for him by the conduct of both women, that the power of beauty can soon transform honesty from what it is to a bawd" (III.i). This enigmatic sentence is thus a rich thematic and associative cluster which blends together at an important moment several of the play's most important events, themes, and ideas in an apparently random remark.

Notes


Henri Suhamy (essay date 1983)


[In the following essay, Suhamy asserts that the disease imagery in Hamlet elicits a variety of interpretations at once, some of which are contradictory and paradoxical.]

The pages written by Caroline Spurgeon on the sickness and corruption imagery in Hamlet remain today perhaps the most famous and striking in a book¹ which the evolution of criticism and the necessary controversies that keep our discipline alive have not pulled down from its deserved position in the history of Shakespearian scholarship. Nor have these admirable pages lost anything of their stimulating pointedness. Yet the very attractiveness of Spurgeon's analyses may contain some danger, especially in relation to Hamlet, a play which should protect us from all forms of dogmaticism, for the hero of it is not only uncertain in him-self, he is the cause that uncertainty is in other men. Readers should beware of too comfortable assumptions about a play which will never yield its secrets easily.

The observation that sin and crime are expressed in terms of disease and rottenness remains indeed very illuminating, provided it is not overexploited and does not produce what could be called the Metaphorical Fallacy. This imagery throws lights on the inner substance and mechanism of language; it reflects the ethical vision of a Christian community; in a play, it expresses some of the implicit opinions of the characters, in so far as characters in a play can be allowed by criticism to express opinions—as indeed they should, for the assessment of opinions constitutes one of the functions of speech. But it may be misleading to infer that there lies the ultimate message of the play and the literary cement holding the whole text together.

My attention was drawn on this question recently by reading that useful and interesting book by Morris Weitz called Hamlet and the Philosophy of Literary Criticism.² Examining in succession some of the main theories on the play from a critical point of view, Weitz found fault with Wilson Knight's interpretation according to which the protagonist represents the blasting consciousness of death amidst a vivacious world of human passions, appetites and activities;³ and he judged his views with exceptional severity:

… Knight's conception of the Hamlet universe as one of strength, health, and humanity, with Hamlet the only sick individual in it, seems utterly perverse and about as far from "the poet's centre of consciousness" as one could get. If anything, as Francis Fergusson, among others, points out, it is the other way round. The Hamlet universe, which includes the court, is corrupt, unhealthy, rotten, founded on murder and incest, and Hamlet is the healthy one seeking, not decisively to be sure, to uncover and scourge the hidden imposthume. Now, I am not claiming that this latter view is correct, only that whatever the core or spiritual reality of Hamlet may be—if it has one—Knight makes a moral mockery of it by his reversal of sickness and health. After all, it is Claudius, not Hamlet, who is the usurper in the Hamlet universe.⁴

This text can raise many commentaries. Morris Weitz has a sound and philosophic turn of mind, but he seems at times to miss some of the subtleties and ambiguities that literature is made of.

First of all, he seems to run headlong into the metaphorical fallacy, by implicitly taking the sickness imagery of the play at its face-value, a curious delusion, when we simply remember that the very essence of metaphor consists in producing figurative senses, not factual statements. This delusion seems also to imply a wishful-thinking belief in poetical justice and retributive Providence. Whatever language may suggest, moral corruption does not systematically provoke physical corruption, even in the fictitious world of Elizabethan plays. Shakespeare knew that a man may smile, and be a villain, and a usurper, and enjoy good health too, when legitimate heirs are pining away in dungeons. When Marcellus says that 'something is rotten in the state...
of Denmark' (1.4.90), he only expresses a personal opinion; it is true that Marcellus' statement has a choric resonance, a proverbial impact, and moreover coincides with the moral judgment that we are invited to pass on Claudius and Gertrude; but, once more, it should not be taken at face value, as an indication given by the author that the kingdom of Denmark is tottering on the brink of political and military collapse. This would mislead the spectators.

Secondly, it appears quite clearly that Weitz did not actually understand Wilson Knight's arguments. It is not the place here for exegesis and advocacy. Knight's essays are sufficiently known to the public and capable of defending themselves against misconceptions. But it may be relevant to point out some of the reasons why they were misunderstood by Weitz, because these reasons are related to the difficulty of interpreting metaphorical language, a language which is not reserved to poets only. Critics can also resort to imagery. Wilson Knight simply remarked that Claudius' crime and guilty conscience do not prevent him from thriving quite successfully as a king, jumping the life to come upon this bank and shoal of time, and that Hamlet can be interpreted symbolically as an ambassador of death incongruously wandering in a world of short-sighted ambitions and carnal appetites. The psychological facet of Hamlet's contemptus mundi results in his being emotionally sickened by the moral sickness of the people about him. There is also a paradox in the fact that he is sickened by the healthy instincts of nature, like Gulliver at Brobdingnag. When Hamlet, nauseated by his mother's hasty re-marriage—a proof of sexual vitality, if also of moral frailty—inveighs against the world because things rank and gross in nature possess it merely (i.e. completely) he uses that most Shakespearian adjective, the word rank, which contains a whole range of contradictory meanings and connotations. Rankness in Shakespeare suggests the very apex of luxuriant and voluptuous vitality, made both appetizing and repellent by the fulsome smell of riotous physicality. This complex cluster of significances entails two important consequences: first, the idea that life, in the full bloom of growth and procreative turgidity, is crude, course, obscenely immoral. Secondly, that maturity and decay follow each other very closely, not only because of the inexorable cycle of nature, but also because maturity already reeks of the sickening smell of corruption, and swells out like a body bloated by disease.

Thus, Shylock, speaking of Jacob's 'fulsome ewes' at the mating season, says that they were 'rank'. In quite a different context, Mark Antony, sounding the intentions of Caesar's murderers, asks them:

\[
\text{I know not Gentlemen what you intend,}
\text{Who else must be let blood, who else is ranke:}
\]

\[
(\text{Julius Caesar, III. 1.152})
\]

Here to be rank is to be ready for death, like a ripe fruit about to drop. The grim joke contained in let blood is quite illuminating: excess of blood must be cured by bleeding, so to cut a man's throat is the most operative remedy to rankness. We are also reminded of the old medical myth, which ensured the reign of the lancet for many centuries, that diseases are caused by excess of blood, that is to say, by excess of health. A paradox often exploited quite explicitly by Shakespeare, war, for instance, being regarded as a consequence of peace. Cf. Hamlet, IV.3.27:

\[
\text{This is th'Impostume of much wealth and peace,}
\text{That inward breaks, and showes no cause without}
\text{Why the man dies.}
\]

The above examples show that metaphorical language does not constitute a rigid code. It is possible indeed to equate sickness with sin, but other correspondences are possible. Wilson Knight happened to use the sickness imagery in his own essay "The Embassy of Death", but with a different framework of meanings: to him sickness means lack of vitality, due to a disabling consciousness of death and of the vanity of human
undertakings. So Morris Weitz applied the wrong code to decipher Wilson Knight's imagery. Yet the latter did not use his own imagery gratuitously. The substance of it is present in the play. It is Hamlet who, in a passage not deprived of some notoriety, says that the native hue of resolution is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought. He undoubtedly alludes to himself here, not to Claudius. So the sickness imagery in *Hamlet* divides itself into—at least—two currents of significance, plainly contradicting each other: The King's prayer is a physic that but prolongs his sickly days (III.3.96) whereas Hamlet feels sicklied by his irresolution (III.1.84).

If the two metaphorical systems are combined together, the result may prove perplexing. If we lay down on the one hand that disease means sin, and on the other that ebullient vitality is essentially immoral, we are driven to the apparently absurd conclusion that health and sickness are interchangeable. This is what Morris Weitz would call a perverse statement. Yet the vision underlying this paradox is profoundly Shakespearian. The immediate proximity of maturity and decay is, as we have just seen a recurrent theme in Shakespeare (cf. for instance Sonnet 11, "As fast as thou shalt wane so fast thou grow'st"), as well as the dualistic enmity between physical and moral beauty. (Cf. the sermon on fairness and honesty delivered by Hamlet to Ophelia, III.1.103-115, *This was sometime a Paradox.*) These obsessions are not alien to the more austere patterns of religious orthodoxy. The idea that life, especially in its generative functions, is stained at the root, should not surprise a western reader.

The fact that Shakespeare could deal in paradoxes and ambiguities has a literary consequence of some weight. It saves the sickness and health imagery of the play from a danger which certainly constitutes one of the aspects of the Metaphorical Fallacy: the danger of banality. Indeed, what is more commonplace and superficial than a semantic texture in which moral misdemeanour is expressed in pathological terms? These correspondences are already present in the remotest etymologies of the words. When the ghost exclaims: *what a falling off was there* (I.5.47) we can fleetingly remember that *fall* and *fault* have the same origin. The word *ill* can be taken in the two senses, *holy* and *healthy* derive from the same root, etc. There is no possibility of poetic invention here. To be sure, the manipulation of words by a great writer can refresh the staleness of this material. In this field Shakespeare's accumulative virtuosity will never cease to arouse our interest, but perhaps it would be naïve to expect some sort of philosophical revelation from the study of a metaphorical network which has been for a long time part and parcel of our lexical and cultural heritage. All this traditional lore verges on tautology, like the apophthegm enunciated by Hamlet:

There's nere a villaine dwelling in all Denmarke
But hee's an arrant knave.

To which Horatio retorted, not unreasonably,

There needes no Ghost my Lord, come from the grave
To tell us this.

(I.5.123-6)\textsuperscript{8}

Must we conclude from these remarks that interest in imagery has overreached its possibilities? Shall we limit our investigations in this field to stylistic skill and thematic consistency,\textsuperscript{9} and return to the times when critics ascribed a merely redundant and decorative function to metaphors, when George Bernard Shaw recognized in Shakespeare nothing but a talent for verbal jugglery, and for painting commonplace wisdom in lively colours?

No we shall not. Such a regression would be damageable to Shakespearian studies. We should not ignore the profound aspects of this imagery, for instance these ambiguities and paradoxes which, as was stated at the beginning of this paragraph, protect Shakespeare's choric voice from banality, and give a problematic turn to
his gnomic utterances. Nor should we forget that the metaphorical texture of the play, suffused with moral and religious references, has a cultural and anthropological dimension, in revealing the inner workings of the Christian mind. These assets are not negligible. They contribute to the lasting and universal interest of *Hamlet* as a text, and not only as a play.

Yet those readers who regard *Hamlet* mostly as a play, as a self-contained work of art, and who read literary criticism only in quest of linear explanations, could perhaps find something useful in the sickness imagery of the text, especially in its very obsessiveness: something dramatically relevant to the tragedy, and perhaps one of the clues to the protagonist's behavioral mystery. The sickness obsession is also a health obsession, not only on account of those conceptual ambiguities and dialectic antitheses which have been previously mentioned, but simply because a person who is obsessed by dirt will also be obsessed by cleanliness. Malady calls for remedy. Now, it appears clearly enough that the hero of the play does not regard himself as a mere link in a *vendetta* concatenation, and that his preoccupations are more moral than political. Even though he is conscious of not being like Hercules—capable, one might infer, of cleansing the Augean Stables, and killing the Hydra of Machiavellianism—and of being distressingly inferior to the task of setting the disjointed Time right again, he has the inordinate ambition of purifying the world. Like Jaques, he most invectively pierceth the body of the country, city, court, and like him he could cry out

*Give me leave*

*To speake my minde, and I will through and through*
*Cleans the foul bodie of th'infected world,*
*If they will patiently receive my medicine.*

(*As You Like It, II.8.58*)

But unlike Jaques, Hamlet is not satisfied with venting out his misanthropy and cleansing *idée fixe* in words. He has what Jaques himself could have called the Reformer's melancholy, which is Utopian. The enterprise of great pitch and moment that Hamlet dreams of is one of moral revitalism and chastisement. He wants to change the nature of women, recommending chastity to all of them; to send Claudius and his accomplices to Hell, not shriving-time allowed; after the murder of Polonius, he regards himself as an agent of Providence. Because his programme can be summed up in one word, Purgation, one might say almost jocularly that the *hubris* of Hamlet, who by his dramatic function as avenger, is supposed to stand for *nemesis*, lies in his ambition to impose *catharsis* on the whole world. In some of his delirious outbursts, for instance when he announces that there will be no more marriages, etc. (III. 1.150) he seems to take himself for one of those angels of God that announced the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah under a rain of brimstone and fire. But the sulphurous and tormenting flames of the prison-house where the Ghost returns at dawn belong to God, not to men, not even to avengers prompted by supernatural solicitings. There is perhaps something Promethean in Hamlet's imaginary stealing of Purgatorial fire.

**Notes**


3 Wilson Knight wrote two main essays on *Hamlet*: "The Embassy of Death" in *The Wheel of Fire*, Oxford University Press (1930); reprinted by Methuen, 1949-61, etc. pp. 17-46 in the Methuen paperback edition; and "Rose of May: an Essay on Lifethemes in *Hamlet*" in *The Imperial Theme* (O.U.P., 1931; reprinted by Methuen 1951-65, etc. pp. 96-124 in the Methuen paperback edition.)

5 This line of argument was considerably developed by J. F. Danby in *Shakespeare’s Doctrine of Nature*, Faber (London, 1949).

6 All through his book, Morris Weitz contends that there is no difference between *interpretation* and *explanation* and that consequently the claims laid by interpretative critics to a distinctive method are not justified. Yet one can remark that in the terminology of literary criticism, *interpretation* usually implies a symbolical approach, and other types of extrapolation, whereas *explanation* is focused on the inward texture and organization of a literary work.

7 *The Merchant of Venice*, 1.3.77 and 83.

8 To obtain the best lineation, Hamlet's cue has been taken from the Folio, and Horatio's from the 1609 Quarto.

9 Cf. the poison theme, for instance, which creates a link between the dramatic events and the imagery.

**Hamlet (Vol. 35): Further Reading**


Contends that Hamlet's dilemma is caused by a dual problem: he must combat the evil that surrounds him and control the violence within himself.


Concentrates on the characters' misconceptions and views these misconceptions as errors that lead to the catastrophe, chief among them being Hamlet's belief that Gertrude is guilty of complicity in Claudius's crime.


A religious interpretation of *Hamlet*, describing a combination of the philosophies of Aristotle, Augustine, and Aquinas in Shakespeare's tragedies.


Compares the plot of the play "with folklore motifs and medieval conventions that justify Hamlet's course of action," claiming that Hamlet rejects Ophelia because she allows herself to be used as a pawn by Claudius.


A three-part examination of *Hamlet* that analyzes theatrical images and style in the development of characterization.

Argues that critics' attempts to illuminate Hamlet's "tragic flaw" by means of Aristotle's *Poetics* are misguided, mainly because Aristotle's aesthetics fail to explain Hamlet's "madness" and his inability to act, and maintains that the Christian doctrine of sin serves as a more satisfactory basis for Hamlet's dilemma.


Examines Hamlet as an essentially moral character who reluctantly enters a life of "action, violence, intrigue and public activity."


Detailed analysis of the language of the play which regards Hamlet's final feeling as one of failure, and maintains that ultimately, he remains a misunderstood figure, or worse, a "common assassin," after his tragic act.


Disputes the Freudian interpretation of Hamlet's character, stressing that Oedipal conflicts manifest themselves differently in different people.


Psychoanalytic study of *Hamlet* that emphasizes its "psychosocial" qualities and represents the character of Hamlet as struggling against a corrupt world.


Presents Fortinbras, Laertes, and Ophelia as a dramatic triad and describes their function as dramatic foils to Hamlet.


Claims that the language of the play creates a "potential space" which gives the reader or auditor a chance to create his or her own alternate meanings and dramatic possibilities.


Includes several chapters that investigate *Hamlet* in relation to the currents of psychoanalytic theory.


Maintains that Shakespeare's "close and detailed concern with the plight of the soul of each character who is to die" argues for an eschatological reading of the play, and that such a reading is enhanced "by the structure of the five acts insofar as it is modeled on the *memento mori-timor mortis* lyric."

Analyzes the dramatic structure of Hamlet and identifies a mode of action characterized by "speculation, interrogation, spying into, finding out, testing, probing, observing, and discovering."


Suggests that Hamlet's famous soliloquy dramatically reveals "that he is grappling with a particular problem that is an outgrowth of the developing event, the presentation of the mousetrap play."


Contends that Hamlet is unable to destroy the evil which surrounds him without first accepting his own human weakness and becoming, like Horatio, a stoic Christian.


Explores the importance of free will and determinism in relation to Hamlet's character.

**Hamlet (Vol. 37): Introduction**

**Hamlet**

Peter B. Murray, *Macalester College*

In some influential post-structuralist commentary on Shakespeare's representation of character, Hamlet is regarded as psychologically incoherent, and humanist critics are said to project onto the inscription of this character the notions of inwardness and an essential self which were fully developed only in the century following the composition of the play. Francis Barker argues that Hamlet is unable to define the truth of his subjectivity directly and fully because his interiority is merely "gestural," so that at his center there is "nothing" (36-7; cf. Belsey, *Subject* 41). Contrary both to the views of the post-structuralists and to the view attributed to humanist critics, I will argue that Hamlet is not psychologically incoherent but has the divided and only partially self-aware and self-controlling subjectivity that in Shakespeare's time was said to characterize human beings. Hamlet is unable to define the truth of his subjectivity directly and fully because he has a complex interiority that makes self-knowledge difficult. Thus this character is himself able to think about how his thinking may be in error. After all, his own statements that his inaction is caused by cowardly thinking are the main source of the theory that he rationalizes to delay revenge (esp. 4.4.32-46; cf. Belsey's opposed view of how to interpret Hamlet's soliloquies, *Subject* 50, 52).

**Hamlet (Vol. 37): Hamlet's Subjectivity**

Regarding the general question of how to think of the text of a play in responding to a character, there is certainly a sense in which a character exists only in the performance of an actor; but on the other hand insofar as we are aware of the actor performing, we are aware, too, that he or she is performing a text. The text is the starting point for both actor and reader. As Harry Berger argues, we infer a character from the text of a play, and this has an important corollary: "a character or dramatic person is the effect rather than the cause of his or
her speech and of our interpretation” (147). Whether we are actors, audience, or readers, however, according to the Elizabethan ideas developed in Chapter 1, our imaginations will mostly assimilate scripted speeches and actions to imagined persons who, like real persons, are the cause of their speech and action. And because we respond to imagined persons as if they were real, we infer "inner" thoughts and feelings from scripted words and deeds in the process of interpreting the characters as the effect of these phenomena in the way Berger says.2

As explained in Chapters 1 and 3, the text is—and was for the Elizabethans—a score for a performance, and a critic who has seen many performances may be able to perform the analysis of the psychology of a character by responding to the text and to memories of performance as evoked by reading the text. My readings have been arrived at in this way, but what I write is based on the potentialities and the constraints for any kind of interpretation that I find inscribed—or implied by what is inscribed—in the text. When I say a character thinks or may think this or that, I mean that the text implies such thoughts, and I do not assume that the character is a real person. The "I find" and "may" here indicate my recognition that any interpretation is inevitably subjective and uncertain, however much one tries to achieve objectivity by taking into account the interpretations of many others and all of the relevant contexts.

In sum, when I infer what Hamlet thinks and feels, I regard him as an imagined person created by Shakespeare to be entered into imaginatively by an actor and imagined or construed by an audience. The audience needs to be able to respond to Hamlet as an imagined person in order to respond appropriately to the play Hamlet.3 For the tragic effect, we must remain sympathetic even when Hamlet does dreadful deeds, and this requires an understanding of his character and situation so that we can see both the qualities that move him and how these lead to tragic error. Hamlet intends to act for the sake of dignity and integrity and the obligations of love, duty, and justice. If he acts wrongly, it is because, as he responds to his very complex and painful situation, his sensitivity and intensity distort his concern for these values, resulting in an error he is unable to see. He has keen awareness, but paradoxically this awareness, joined with his sensitivity and intensity, results in a self-absorbed blindness in crucial situations.

Of course this is only one possible interpretation of Hamlet's character, even using a behaviorist analysis. One strength of a behaviorist analysis is that it suggests that motivation is multiple as well as complex—that thought and action have as many motives as they have reinforcing consequences—so that a single reading can include a number of interpretations usually found only in competing readings (or such motivation is sometimes referred to without much analysis as "overdetermined"). Because a behaviorist analysis focusses on what a character specifically experiences from moment to moment, it is an analysis that could be especially helpful to an actor seeking a psychological understanding to use as a basis for performance.

The explication of text in a behaviorist interpretation occupies so much more space than does the accompanying technical psychological analysis that at times the interpretation may appear not to be specifically behaviorist. I have tried to strike a balance between showing that a behaviorist analysis can be written without excessive use of technical terminology, and explaining phenomena in technical terms sufficiently to show how a behaviorist analysis works. I will count on a reader's recognizing that certain terms having a common-sense meaning have a similar but more specific meaning in behaviorist psychology. In Chapter 2 I have explained Skinner's powerful analysis of the relations between emotions, thoughts, and actions. That chapter explains the technical use of terms such as "avoidance," "escape," "aversive," "reinforced" or "reinforcing," and "evoke": an event or thought evokes a "response" a person is "disposed" to because it has been made probable by conditioning. "Disposed" is used similarly in the proto-behaviorist tradition—we are disposed to act a certain way because of our habituation. Readers will also be able to tell that my analysis is behaviorist in its ways of discussing what a character sees and does not see, how certain thoughts are displaced by others, how absorption in a point of view affects thinking, how intentions arise and change, how intentions and emotions affect and are affected by actions, and so forth. Thus it should be clear that a distinctive psychology is being used even when technical terms are not employed, as is also the case in
some psychoanalytic essays on literature.

I analyze Hamlet in detail in order to demonstrate how his character is psychologically coherent throughout the play. I discuss the play Hamlet first because none of Shakespeare's works has more to do with ideas about intention, motivation, and action, with the psychology of role-playing and the link between the psychology of acting and of personal life,4 and with the proto-behaviorist ideas about habit and character. The play contains statements that refer to all the most important ideas in the proto-behaviorist tradition. Early in the play Hamlet draws on the traditional idea that we are creatures of nature but also of habituation. He explains that as a custom which is a vice causes a whole people to lose the respect of others, individuals lose respect "for some vicious mole of nature in them," or "By their o'ergrowth of some complexion," or "by some habit, that too much o'erleavens / The form of plausible manners . . ." (1.4.24-30). When Hamlet arraigns his mother in the closet scene, he suggests that her habitual vice may have "braz'd" her heart so she cannot feel the evil of her life with Claudius (3.4.34-8). In the graveyard scene, Horatio refers to the related principle that habituation makes unpleasant activities become easy in explaining that the Gravedigger sings because he has become accustomed to his work (5.1.65-9). The closet scene, again, has the most complete statement of the psychology of habits in Shakespeare. When Hamlet urges his mother not to go to bed with Claudius, he explains that although custom or habit is a monster in making us unaware of the evil in our vices, by the same token if she acts virtuously she will come to think virtuously, too (3.4.162-72). Attitudes follow behavior.

Each of these passages poses a question about Hamlet. Is he one in whom a "complexion" such as the humor of melancholy "o'ergrows" to break down "the pales and forts of reason" or in whom "some habit . . . too much o'erleavens the form of plausible manners"? In the closet scene, is Hamlet becoming "braz'd" so that he is callous to the death of Polonius as he turns from stabbing him to speak daggers to his mother about her sins? Does such conduct as the role-playing of the antic disposition change him? In the graveyard and at the end of the play have gravemaking and thoughts of death come to have "a property of easiness for him"?

Now, I am certainly not the first to suggest that the psychology of habits may be important in Hamlet.5 A. C. Bradley repeatedly uses the word "habit" in discussing Schlegel's and Coleridge's ideas about Hamlet. He says that in their view Hamlet's excessive thinking "proceeds from an original one-sidedness of nature, strengthened by habit, and perhaps, by years of speculative inaction" (85). Bradley's thesis is that Hamlet's "imaginative and generalising habit of mind" causes his melancholy over his mother's conduct to affect "his whole being and mental world." Hamlet's "speculative habit" helps cause him endlessly to dissect the proposed deed, and the frustration and shame of his delay make him even more melancholy (93). Bradley sees Hamlet becoming caught up in a vicious circle of thought, feeling, and inaction that deepens his melancholy and renders him less and less able to act. Bradley tends to attribute most of Hamlet's feelings, attitudes, and behavior to his melancholy (99), regarding the antic disposition mostly as an effect, as a form of inaction, not also as an important cause, an "act" having an important effect on Hamlet.

Some nineteenth-century interpreters of Hamlet did think of the psychology of habits in connection with the antic disposition as an "act," however. C. A. H. Clodius wrote in 1820 that Hamlet's pretended madness "eventually becomes a habit" so that he is "really melancholy and insane" (2:280), and this view was echoed by Hartley Coleridge in 1828 (2:198). Clodius's reading is an interesting effort to synthesize the poles of the nineteenth-century debate on the question of whether Hamlet's madness is real or feigned. This question could then—before Freud's thinking displaced the older psychology—still evoke the answer that what is feigned may become real through habituation. Although I do not think Hamlet becomes mad by pretending to be mad, I will argue that his "habit" of mourning and his antic disposition do affect him, directly in a way related to the psychology of habits and indirectly through his interpretation of others' responses to his behavior.

It is a convention of dramatic literature that the audience should make inferences about characters' dispositions and motives and even about some influences in their earlier lives based on what they do and say and what others say about them: consider what is conveyed by Hamlet's anguished "Must I remember?"
Hamlet's first soliloquy expresses dispositions that we see repeatedly in the play and that we can only imagine have been shaped by his upbringing and education (1.2.129-59). His life at Wittenberg may have heightened a disposition to reflect on experience. He has also developed a concern for Christian values and for the values of noblemen, and it is important that in his situation these two sets of values oppose each other. Hamlet's earlier life has also of course shaped his attitudes toward his father and mother. Hamlet regards his father as noble, and he remembers his mother to have seemed so until she wed Claudius (139-45). In its context, Hamlet's exaggerated idealization of his father as a "Hyperion" is especially reinforced because it emphasizes the baseness of Claudius as a "satyr" (139-40).

Hamlet's ways of thinking and acting have depended on his being reinforced for regarding his father and mother as ideal models whose position held great promise for their son, "Th'expectancy and rose of the fair state" (3.1.154). Because his father is dead and the monarchy is now corrupted by his mother and uncle, the activities of a prince are no longer reinforced for Hamlet. This, along with his grief and outrage, has caused him to fall into a lethargic depression in which "all the uses of this world" seem "weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable" (1.2.133-4). Further, his mother's conduct, especially, has made noble thoughts aversive as they remind him of what she has done (143, 146). In proto-behaviorist terms, we see that it is his character—his disposition ingrained in habits—to think idealistically, valuing honesty, loyalty, love, and noble action. Because he is strongly disposed to think in this way—reinforced by self-esteem—he continues to do so, which means that now his own thoughts add to his torment.

The offensive behavior of Claudius and Gertrude moves him to such great shame, scorn, despair, and rage that in the soliloquy he does not directly express grief for his father. However, real grief must accompany what he says to let him be reinforced by a sense of justification in his outrage over his mother's having mourned so briefly. And Hamlet's grief itself is indirectly expressed in his sense of loss and his idealization of his father.

Hamlet's expression of a wish to die is evidence less of self-rejection than of concern for self-respect—the wish is reinforced as a thought of escape from life's anguish and indignity. The Prince's outraged sense of honor clashes with his Christian values as he finds it reinforcing to think he does not kill himself only because God forbids it. The thought of suicide seems mostly a gesture of protest: he articulates it only in explaining why he cannot do it. Hamlet does not blame himself for any of the wrongs that have occurred. On the contrary, there are hints of self-righteousness in his attitudes. His princely concern for self-respect and noble ideals makes it especially reinforcing for him to think that all the shame comes from his mother and her world.

Yet Hamlet does feel his life has been stripped of value, does feel some contempt for himself because he feels helpless, unable even to speak to remedy what his mother has done. Hence this soliloquy expresses a peculiar mingling of contempt for self with self-respect and self-righteousness. Hamlet's thoughts of how he is sullied primarily evoke a heightened bitterness and vehemence of response from his disposition to affirm his ideals and to scorn those who are truly base. The scorn he expresses is strongly reinforced when it generalizes to all the world and all women because then it all the more expresses the superiority of his father and his ideals and justifies his thinking that he cannot prevail against his foes. This kind of thinking creates the danger that Hamlet will find it reinforcing to think everyone associated with his mother's world is corrupt, or to exaggerate their actual corruption. Also, insofar as he may respond to attacks on his self-respect by seeking grounds to affirm it, he will be strongly reinforced for selectively seeing what he himself does and thinks in an approving and even self-righteous way.

There is no clear evidence that anything Hamlet says here is specifically shaped by Oedipal or pre-Oedipal motives; that is, there is no evidence that his strong idealization of his father is a reaction formation or that his emotional agitation over his mother's conduct is a result of repressed sexual wishes or anxieties. It is impossible, however, to rule out such interpretations, since his feelings about himself and his mother and father and about what his mother and uncle have done may support them. Perhaps we should conclude that here the pre-Oedipal and Oedipal background from Hamlet's early life does not contribute much to the
specific shape of what he expresses beyond the conscious manifestations of idealizing his father and being emotionally involved with his mother's nature and behavior.

There are indications that Hamlet avoids reaching the most aversive conclusions about his mother. He may say all women are frail because it is less painful to think this than to think his own mother is an exceptionally frail woman. Also, he could have interpreted Gertrude's brief effusion of tears before her speedy marriage to Claudius as less frail than hypocritical. Such an interpretation could then have led Hamlet to suspect adultery and, given his hatred of his uncle, murder. Hamlet's strong emotional absorption in his response to the open wrong he sees—his mother's hasty remarriage to a base man—may also contribute to blocking any suspicious thoughts that might occur if he were more detached. He wants to believe the worst of his mother because she has hurt him so terribly, but because she is his mother and can hurt him so much, he does not want to believe the very worst of her.

Hamlet's not dwelling on his grief when alone prompts us to compare his emotions in the soliloquy with his earlier protestations to his mother that he feels grief to the depths of his being (1.2.76-86). Hamlet's continued mourning is customary, for Claudius concedes as much in his first speech (1-4). But is it only his father's death that motivates Hamlet's mourning in defiance of his mother and uncle? This question goes to the heart of the play's exploration of the causes of human behavior and the connection between an intention and an act. In traditional terms, we want to know whether Hamlet intends or has an "unconscious wish" to punish Gertrude and the King by constantly reminding them that they are wrong to have mourned so briefly and married so hastily. If we infer an intention to punish, we may see hypocrisy in Hamlet's claim that he knows not seems and is grieving to the very core of his being. That is, he does not explicitly say he feels only grief but implies this while merely saying he has inside him more than can be shown. If we see what "passes show" as including an intention to punish Gertrude and Claudius, we may think Hamlet is a sly role-player in his speech claiming he knows not seems.

A behaviorist reading can provide a different kind of answer. Hamlet's mourning is reinforced by several consequences, among them punishment of his mother and Claudius, though he may only think of his feelings for his father. Thus mourning is reinforced because Hamlet does indeed feel grief, and mourning for his father is the only expression of his ideals and character that he feels he can enact. However, the mourning does vex the King and Queen, and Hamlet is aware of this. Hence, since his anger at them causes punishing them to be reinforced, their vexation inevitably reinforces Hamlet's mourning. If it would be aversive for Hamlet to think he mourns in order to punish them, then it is not likely that this thought will occur to him or, if it does, that he would believe it. His protestations that he knows not "seems" indicate that it would be aversive for him to think his mourning is not wholly for the sake of his father.

Here I think the play strongly evokes empathy with Hamlet, and a behaviorist analysis validates this response by saying that while his mourning is motivated partly because it punishes the King and Queen, Hamlet is not necessarily conscious of this at all, that his scorn of seeming, along with everything else he says here, indicates he is not a conscious seer himself. But Hamlet's character may change as a result of the combination of his painful circumstances and his own disposition and behavior. His mourning may become obsessive through a process that proto-behaviorism related to becoming habituated to the behavior, as is perhaps implied in the reference to Hamlet's "customary suits of solemn black" (1.2.78). Hamlet may be caught up in a vicious circle, something like the one Bradley proposes, in which (1) his father's death motivates sincere grieving, (2) this behavior becomes strong because it is reinforced by several results, as explained above, (3) these strong expressions of grief induce more grief (as a conditioned response) and an increased tendency to be unsocial and solitary, and (4) solitariness in turn increases melancholy. And so on and on until Hamlet is completely obsessed with his grief and anger, at which point, in Elizabethan terms, the habit or "adustion" of melancholy and choler would make him not only sad and angry but long in deliberation, full of doubts but obstinate once he has made up his mind, deceitful, and suspicious or fearful of others without factual basis, and so forth—all the symptoms of melancholy that scholars have made familiar to us.
because they seem to fit Hamlet at times (e.g. see excerpt from Bright in Hoy 100-11).

When Horatio and the soldiers enter at the conclusion of Hamlet's soliloquy in 1.2, it takes a moment for Hamlet to recognize his friend (160-1). Then as he greets Horatio we see that Hamlet's disposition as a noble prince and a friend is still strong. He is gracious to Horatio, interpreting generously his embarrassed answers about why he has come to Elsinore, inviting him to criticize Gertrude's behavior and then quickly confirming his friend's reply (163-83). Hamlet's response to the news that his father's spirit has appeared shows that in these circumstances he can make a quick resolution to act in a risky way. He immediately decides to join the watch that night, saying "If it assume my noble father's person, / I'll speak to it though hell itself should gape / And bid me hold my peace" (244-6). There is a note of bluster in this, as though Hamlet is rising to meet a challenge rather than expressing a resolution habitual to his character, but meeting a ghost is not the sort of challenge one accustoms oneself to meet. Hamlet is eager especially because in his frustration he finds it very reinforcing to take action that links him with his father and confirms his feeling that the world is corrupt (255-8).

As they wait that night for the ghost to appear, Horatio's question about the King's drinking is answered by Hamlet in terms that, as I suggested earlier, may apply to himself (1.4.12-38). Many critics have suggested this, of course, and sometimes the speech is interpreted as an explicit statement of something like a theory of the "tragic flaw." Interestingly, it becomes such a statement through the way it is only indirectly such a statement. That is, Hamlet is not explaining how "one defect" in a trait or habit causes the doom of men who are otherwise noble. Rather, his point is that such a flaw causes such men to suffer dishonor. Hamlet's disposition to be a noble prince causes such loss of nobility to be the kind of doom that moves him to feel the tragic qualm.

The Ghost appears, and Hamlet responds in fear, love, and awe, as we would expect on the basis of what we have seen of his characteristic dispositions. Hamlet rejects his companions' warnings of danger and follows the Ghost because he is strongly disposed both to be with his father and to think he has nothing to lose in dying (64-5). Hamlet may also be brave in his habitual character, but it takes more than habitual courage to follow a ghost into the midnight darkness.

In the next scene, once he understands that Claudius has murdered his father, Hamlet is eager to obey the call to revenge. His cry of "O my prophetic soul! My uncle!" (41), does not necessarily indicate that he has earlier suspected his uncle of murder, however. Each of Hamlet's responses to the Ghost before this line indicates more a questioning attitude than an eager suggestion that the Ghost should quickly confirm what he already thinks (7-8, 25-6, 29). Hamlet may speak of his prophetic soul thinking or wishing he had suspected his uncle of murder, or perhaps he means that his hatred of his uncle was an intuitive response to the man's villainous nature. "O my prophetic soul!" may refer specifically to his suspicion at the end of 1.2 that there has been "some foul play" (256). Foul play may be what was prophesied, and "My uncle!" may express a mixture of surprise and confirmation of an intuition that is reinforced because of his hatred.

Hatred of his uncle makes it very reinforcing for Hamlet to believe the Ghost and to accept the command to revenge (1.5.92-112). Hamlet's passionate tone here can be explained by his fierce hatred of Claudius, by the overwhelming nature of what he has just experienced, by his gladness to be released from frustration in having a noble deed to perform, and by his being able to act for his father. As a result of all these reinforcing consequences, Hamlet represses whatever doubts he might otherwise feel. Thus he is not consciously whipping himself into a vengeful rage. There is a highly theatrical quality to his reaching for hyperbole, his rhetorical questions and assertions, and in general the near-fustian quality of the entire speech. But I think this character, who is now so strongly disposed to nobility and honesty, will speak in such a hyperbolic way only if he is entirely absorbed in the feeling and its rhetoric. The speech is an immediate response to an overwhelming experience and he is in a state of vengeful rage from the start.
What Hamlet swears in this speech is to obey the Ghost's final injunction, "Remember me" (91). Both he and the Ghost mean that he should remember his father partly in order to remember to take revenge. Ironically, Hamlet keeps this vow and yet delays revenge: cognitive acts do not in themselves produce physical action. That Hamlet assumes a person simply does what he thinks to do is also suggested in his earlier asking the Ghost to tell him about his murder quickly so he can "sweep" to revenge "with wings as swift / As meditation or the thoughts of love" (29-31). The irony here is very clear—Hamlet does sweep to his revenge on wings as swift as meditation; he does not yet realize that meditation and the thoughts of love can move slowly. The obviousness of this irony is a sign we should take the error into account as implying a question about the relation between thoughts and deeds.

In Hamlet's vow to think of nothing but the Ghost's command and to wipe out of his mind all he has ever learned, there is a danger he will become obsessed. In his excited state, Hamlet is strongly reinforced for thinking that absolute single-mindedness regarding his purpose is fitting. Such single-mindedness would not only be dangerous psychologically but also morally and practically in making him unable to gain perspective on what he is to do. However, Hamlet's vowing to think only of revenge is part of his excited hyperbole, and once his excitement passes, he can be expected to recover the disposition to reflect on his situation.

Until nearly the end of this scene Hamlet remains in an excited, almost hysterical state. The forceful assurance he gives Horatio and Marcellus that the Ghost is honest shows he continues to be powerfully reinforced for believing the Ghost's story. Hamlet's belief is actually strengthened by his past thinking, which he has not wiped away, including his own earlier hatred of his uncle. Indeed, Hamlet's phrasing suggests that he affirms the Ghost's honesty so forcefully in part because the Ghost has validated this hatred, though Hamlet does not indicate awareness of such a motive:

HOR. There's no offence, my lord.
HAM. Yes by Saint Patrick but there is, Horatio,
And much offence too. Touching this vision here,
It is an honest ghost, that let me tell you.

(141-4)

When Hamlet finally comes down from his state of excitement, his words suggest that his speech to the Ghost also helps to calm himself: "Rest, rest, perturbed spirit" (190). Following this he is more gracious to Horatio and Marcellus, more the friend he was in 1.2. As he begins to think less excitedly of what he has vowed to do, Hamlet's feeling about his mission changes: "The time is out of joint. O cursed spite, / That ever I was born to set it right" (1.5.196-7). He accepts the necessity of taking revenge but sees what he is to do as a vast and burdensome undertaking. This is a realistic perception, and so we can easily sympathize with him. These words may go far toward explaining the difficulty he experiences in bringing himself to kill Claudius.

It is just before Hamlet becomes calm that he tells Horatio and Marcellus that he may "put an antic disposition on" (1.5.180). As many critics have suggested, Hamlet may say this first of all because in the continuing excitement of his "wild and whirling words" he is already in an antic disposition (139). Whether he also has a purpose related to his revenge in saying this is uncertain, since he never explains why he puts on the antic disposition. To explain the behavior, then, we can look for the consequences that reinforce it, with the understanding that Hamlet may not be aware of all these. This understanding can help explain how Hamlet can say in his soliloquy at the end of Act 2 that he does not know why he has not yet killed Claudius. If he could see how the antic disposition interferes with turning himself toward revenge, he might be able to understand his delay.

Let us review the possible reinforcing consequences of the antic behavior, any of which Hamlet may think of as a purpose for it at some time. First, Hamlet may hope that the antic role will protect him, though its actual
effect is to draw the King's questioning attention. Second, it may be Hamlet's intention to move the King in this way so that his reactions will reveal his guilt. Third, the King's indulgence of the antic humor may help to catch his conscience by disarming whatever suspicions he might otherwise have regarding Hamlet's staging a play about a royal murder. Fourth, the antic disposition enables Hamlet to feel detached from the Court and to evoke or expose folly, baseness, and treachery in Polonius, Rosencrantz, and Guildenstern. Thus the antic behavior enables Hamlet to manipulate and dominate his foes. It also enables him to speak freely though in a somewhat disguised manner what he really feels, perhaps functioning in this way as a safety-valve allowing him to express his deep bitterness in a form that is less aversive for him than the deep bitterness itself. In addition, the antic role gives Hamlet time to consider what to do, and hence also allows delay of a deed he may find aversive even if he feels strongly committed to doing it.

The antic role may be a way to avoid acting, but of course the antic role itself is an "act," and Hamlet's expressions of scorn in this role could cause him to become absorbed in this activity, tending to displace action as a revenger, a role that calls for using daggers rather than merely speaking them. In behaviorist terms, since the antic role does enable him to speak daggers, it would certainly be reinforced as a form of revenge, and absorption in it might be reinforced very strongly because it also enables him to avoid the aversive aspects of thinking about blood revenge.

Although the antic role is marked by an alienated detachment, this could be more a detachment from others than from self. It has often been suggested that Hamlet is an eiron who has a self-detachment enabling him to see himself well. If instead he becomes absorbed in the righteously alienated viewpoint of the antic role, he might see only those of his own faults that allow him to retain a fundamentally self-protective view of himself. The antic role gives Hamlet the impression that he has a detached, objective perspective on others, but this impression could be reinforced because it masks from himself a use of the role to confirm his worst suspicions of everyone. As mentioned earlier, since his feelings about Claudius and Gertrude strongly dispose him to see evil in anyone he links with them, Hamlet would find it reinforcing to interpret any strange responses of characters such as Polonius as evidence they are false to him. Revealing or finding evil in others could further arouse hatred in Hamlet, and his preoccupation with their evil could heighten any tendency in him toward self-righteousness, a tendency reinforced by self-esteem. The more detached and isolated from others he becomes, the less he would be able to engage in role-taking (taking others' points of view) or in fellow-feeling of the sort depending on the acknowledgement of faults or frailties similar to theirs in himself. Thus through playing this role, he might become increasingly suspicious and crafty, hostile and self-righteous, his penetrating intelligence narrowed so that although he expresses profound insights, he fails to consider matters of great importance adequately.

On the other hand, insofar as Hamlet is not absorbed in the antic role's viewpoint, the process of "acting" feelings that are partly sincere and partly "put on" could tend to blur his emotional reality for himself and turn him into one who self-consciously performs his emotions. In this sense Hamlet may become an actor: through putting on an antic disposition he may become less an antic than one who puts on. This would interfere with his ability to identify with any role, and hence help to explain his difficulty in becoming a revenger. But although a number of critics write that Hamlet needs to be able to fuse himself fully with the role of revenger, it is not clear that the play suggests this would be a desirable result either morally or psychologically or even practically. It seems more important for us to see whether Hamlet remains true to his noble character and whether he taints his mind in revenge (1.3.78, 1.5.85).

Turning from hypotheses about the antic disposition to the text, we should consider more specifically the shape of the antic behavior. Although the court thinks Hamlet is mad, we can take it for granted from his behavior when he is alone or with Horatio or the players that he is not simply insane in the sense of being out of touch with reality. Thus Hamlet is pretending to be mad when he seems to be unable to recognize Polonius or remember whether he has a daughter (2.2.174, 182). This episode also suggests an alternative interpretation which has frequently been offered, that Hamlet is not so much pretending to be insane as he is playing the
Fool, using his reputation of madness as the Fool uses his reputation of natural "idiocy" as a mask preventing the others from fully understanding and taking offense at his pointed witticisms. I do not mean to suggest that Hamlet has a playful involvement with the antic disposition. Even when he may act as if he thinks he does, I think the text shows he is confined by his antic role in a bitterly narrow perspective.\textsuperscript{7

Statements of other characters describing the antic disposition give the impression that at least some of Hamlet's behavior is more mad than Foolish; in the behavior we actually see, on the other hand, Hamlet is more Fool than madman. The most bizarre conduct the audience sees is in 4.2 and 4.3. Then it is not entirely certain that Hamlet controls his behavior fully as he does such things as play hide-and-seek with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and the others who are trying to make him tell where Polonius's body is. Hamlet's behavior in these scenes, however, comes too late to influence greatly our impression of the antic disposition.

In Act 2 Ophelia's description of his conduct in her chamber especially gives us an idea of the behavior which convinces other characters that he is mad (2.1.75-100). We cannot tell whether Hamlet controls this behavior as part of what he deliberately "puts on" in his antic role. His pallor suggests genuine feeling, but his disordered attire and knocking knees are more "playable." There is a strong expression of what troubles him in his "look so piteous in purport / As if he had been loosed out of hell / To speak of horrors" (82-4). These lines imply virtual identification with the Ghost and its mission, an obsession with "horrors" that is sickening Hamlet's thoughts and emotions. He expresses the depth of his anguish in a "sigh so piteous and profound / As it did seem to shatter all his bulk / And end his being" (94-6). Hamlet thus reveals to Ophelia something of what he cannot put into words for her, his preoccupation with horrors loosed from hell that he feels are ending his being. He is evidently reinforced for sharing his suffering with Ophelia as someone who will pity him. He would also be reinforced for inflicting pain upon her, since she has refused to see him and since his bitterness may now* extend to her as a woman and hence frail.

It is clear, then, that Hamlet's conduct is not always and only foolery. During the period of the antic disposition, Hamlet's behavior from the outset has elements of both Fool and madman, as in the near hysteria from which it arose at the end of Act 1. In either of these modes the antic disposition would enable Hamlet to express his emotions in a way that is not well controlled while being reinforced by the thought that this behavior is under his control. The behavior is so strongly reinforced by its effect on the court that any thought which justifies it to himself and explains it as sane will also be strongly reinforced: I must be in control of this behavior because I know I am putting it on: "I essentially am not in madness, / But mad in craft" (3.4.189-90). Hamlet means he only pretends to be mad, but he lacks control of this claim itself, since he does not intend the ironic meaning that he may indeed become mad in craftiness, enjoying the "sport" he finds in plot and counter-plot.

We first see Hamlet put on the antic manner in his dialogue with Polonius in 2.2. Hamlet plays the Fool as he says that Polonius is a fishmonger: the joke is that Polonius thinks Hamlet is too mad to recognize him and does not see he is being called a whoremaster (174). But in the light of Hamlet's recent behavior, even a lesser fool than Polonius might think that Hamlet is mad. Indeed, most of Polonius's responses here simply reflect his presumption of Hamlet's madness: if Hamlet says something sane, Polonius can only respond that "Though this be madness, yet there is method in't" (205-6). Polonius has learned to think a certain way and is therefore reinforced for interpreting whatever happens as confirming what he thinks.

But is not something like this occurring in Hamlet's thinking, too? He presumes that Polonius is a fool, and he is strongly reinforced for thinking that the old man's responses merely confirm this conviction (219). For another example, when Hamlet later induces him to say that a cloud is shaped like a camel and a weasel and a whale, Polonius must think he is humoring a madman. Yet Hamlet manipulates Polonius's responses to confirm that he is a fool (3.2.367-75). Each man finds it reinforcing to think himself intelligent and the other mad or foolish, and each is partly right, partly wrong. Hamlet's tone with Polonius in 2.2 suggests that he finds it very reinforcing to give full credit to his wit as the cause of his triumph. Since it would be aversive for
Hamlet to see how truly mad he has seemed or to acknowledge any validity in Polonius's point of view, he does not do the role-taking that could enable him to see how his earlier mad conduct affects Polonius's responses.

At the end of this dialogue, Hamlet expresses a death-wish when he says he would not part with anything more willingly than Polonius, "except my life, except my life, except my life" (215-17). Hamlet's feeling about Polonius may partly prompt him to say at this moment that he wishes to die. "These tedious old fools" (219) inhabit the unweeded garden of Hamlet's world and add to his weary despair of life (1.2.133-5). Ironically, insofar as Hamlet is responsible for the mode of his dialogue with Polonius, he is himself the creator of the tediousness. Hamlet's antic behavior contributes to the folly and falseness he rails against in the antic role, so that a vicious circle is created in which he is increasingly alienated and less able to see how he partly causes what he sees as contemptible in others. The more he scorches them, the more he will find it reinforcing to see that he is right to scorn them. This in turn will make it progressively less likely that he will be disposed to see that their behavior with him is in part shaped by his own behavior.

We see this pattern develop further in Hamlet's following dialogue with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. These friends of his (and Hamlet himself insists that they have been good friends: 2.2.224, 284-6) have been told that Hamlet is mad, and so far as they know, the only purpose of the King and Queen in sending them to Hamlet is to help him recover by finding out what is troubling him (2.2.1-39). There is no hint here that they think of themselves as the King's spies: this is Hamlet's inference and it is important to see how he arrives at it. In the first part of their dialogue he expresses a gladness to see them and a willingness to engage in witty repartee, yet they are aware he receives them "with much forcing of his disposition" and with what appears to them a "crafty madness" through which he evades their inquiries (3.1.12, 8). Hamlet's first greeting seems to express surprise as well as friendliness, and when they respond with witty remarks on their relation to Fortune, he continues the dialogue at the level of banter about the parts of Fortune instead of bringing them closer as friends by asking more personal questions (2.2.224-36). Soon we hear the main tone of the antic voice in the bitterly wise wit of his melancholy assertions that Fortune is a strumpet, that if the world is becoming honest doomsday must be near, that the world and especially Denmark are prisons, and that the seeming great of the world are but the outstretched shadows of beggars (235-65).

In the midst of this, Hamlet explains that the reason he sees Denmark as a prison is that his thinking has made it so (249-51). In saying this, Hamlet implies that the cause of his suffering is more in his mind than in the facts of his situation, distorting if not falsifying what he believes. He again implies that his problem is only in his melancholy state when he says he suffers from "bad dreams" and not from thwarted ambition (254-6). Clearly Hamlet holds his friends at arm's length, concealing the true causes of his griefs. Yet he suddenly demands that they "deal justly" with him and "be even and direct" in answer to his question about whether they were sent for by the King and Queen (276, 287). Because they hesitate so long in answering this question, he begins to think of them as being on the King's side and against him (290-1, 294-5). There is no sign he takes into account that his supposed madness, his forcing his disposition, and his failure to be even and direct have made it difficult for them to be even and direct.

Hamlet sees himself from his own point of view, as a sane person justified in self-concealment and suspicions of others, and his righteous tone suggests that he does not take their role in order to observe himself from their point of view. Hamlet himself needs what he expects the players to provide for the King and Queen, a mirror to be held up so he can see all the features of his antic behavior that so strongly influence others' responses to him. He creates the impression that he is mad, but evidently expects his friends to respond to him as a normal person. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern do not know what to expect or how to deal with a friend who is mad, and it is reasonable to infer that they should be played as anxious in their repartee from the start.

If Hamlet errs here, the error is a main cause of the deaths of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, so let us look more closely at the evidence that Hamlet judges them unfairly. When he asks if they were sent for, his choice
of words in asking them to "deal justly" implies that he will regard an acknowledgement that they were sent for as a confession (2.2.274-6). This makes it difficult for them to answer honestly, and as they hesitate to speak, he says their looks confess that they were sent for, implying that this fact taints their friendship (278-9).

In addition, Hamlet apologizes so strenuously for the poverty of his thanks for their visit that they may find what he says unconvincing (272-4). If the Prince were to take the role of these two "indifferent children of the earth" (227), he might not speak of himself as a beggar. Moreover, there is a sarcastic thrust at them in his remark that "sure, dear friends, my thanks are too dear a halfpenny" (273-4). Although this may mean his thanks are of little worth, the words imply that even such thanks are too good for them if they were sent for. Addressing them as "dear friends" in the midst of all this can make Hamlet seem an insincere friend himself, and he is surely dishonest if he exaggerates the closeness of their friendship to coerce them to be honest: "by the rights of our fellowship, by the consonancy of our youth, by the obligation of our ever-preserved love . . ." (284-7).

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's responses to Hamlet's questions show they have been put on the defensive and are uncertain how to answer. They do not lie: "To visit you, my lord, no other occasion" is not a lying answer to his question "what make you at Elsinore?" (270-1). The answer equivocates about whether they were sent for, but they do finally acknowledge that they were (269-92). They are only as false to Hamlet as he is to them in not being "even and direct." Their reluctance to be more direct can perhaps be largely explained by the nature of the truth: they believe he is mad and they want to help his family cure him. Alas, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern "have not craft enough to colour" their discomfort (280), nor Hamlet, absorbed in his craft, enough perspective to interpret their discomfort justly: "there is nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it so" (249-50). The result is truly tragic, for Hamlet's disposition to be concerned for honesty and loyalty is what heightens the crafty wariness of his antic attitude so that his perception is severely narrowed.

As the scene continues, Hamlet behaves in a friendly manner with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, but this manner appears to mask a preoccupation with his private concerns. In the dialogue about the players, Hamlet immediately hints at the reason why he warms to this topic: "He that plays the king shall be welcome" (318). A little later he commiserates with the boy actors because they are required to "exclaim against their own succession" (349). Also, he compares the triumph of the boys over the adult actors to Claudius's succeeding his father in the affections of the people (357-64). When he then formally welcomes Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to Elsinore, the terms he uses suggest more concern for social propriety than a wish to be truly a friend (366-71). Next he hints that his madness is not real, but his words about hawks and handsaws are mystifyingly antic enough to confuse his friends and perhaps even to make them think he is mad (372-5). The hint that he merely feigns madness is probably lost completely when he then plays the antic strongly for Polonius.

Hamlet again lays aside his antic manner when he welcomes the players and asks for a recital of Aeneas's narrative of the revenge slaying of Priam. As the First Player performs, the text does not indicate whether Hamlet's conscience as a revenger is caught, or whether he sees how Gertrude's conscience might be caught by the grief of Hecuba for her slain husband. However, when he stops the Player, he comments on how the theater reflects the realities of the time, and he sets in motion the use of a play to catch the conscience of the King (519-36). This suggests that in his request for a recital about Priam's slaying, Hamlet continues to be preoccupied with his own situation.

When Hamlet is alone a few lines later, he does not respond directly to the grief of Hecuba or to the ruthless action of the revenger, but to the passion of the actor. Hamlet may seem to say it is "monstrous" that the Player has been moved so greatly by the "force" of a mere "conceit" in a fiction (545-54), but I think the context of these words suggests that this is not his real point. In saying that the actor forces his soul to his conceit and thereby produces emotion, Hamlet says no more than writers on rhetoric and poetry said about the power of vivid language to move a speaker, as explained in Chapter 1. What Hamlet finds monstrous is that he himself has not been moved even though he has great personal cause, and the monstrosity of this is
especially revealed through comparison with the actor, who is moved by a mere fiction. This comparison, and the self-judgment it prompts Hamlet to make, is indicated at the start of this speech, as he begins to speak of the actor: "O what a rogue and peasant slave am I! / Is it not monstrous that this player here . . ." (544-5). Hamlet uses the comparison to lash himself with thoughts of how the actor would be moved to an amazing height of passion if he had cause for revenge, while he, Hamlet, has been dull and muddy-mettled, peaking like John-a-Dreams (561-4). Hamlet attacks himself vehemently because doing so is less aversive than failing to oppose his shameful state. That is, because he is strongly disposed to be noble, he feels guilty, which makes it negatively reinforcing for him to punish himself.

When Hamlet asks himself what has caused him to delay his revenge, all he thinks of is cowardice, but he asks if he is a coward: he speaks of cowardice as what "must" be holding him back, since he has failed to act, not as what he knows he has felt (566-76). This invites us to try to see for ourselves why he has delayed, and, needless to say, critics have offered many possible explanations, usually explanations suggested by the whole pattern of his action in the play. In my reading, the speech suggests that the psychology of acting helps to account for Hamlet's delay and his inability to explain it to himself.

The key to this idea is to see how Hamlet has not so completely differed from the actor as he thinks he has. I have argued that Hamlet is absorbed in his antic role and that this absorption could tend to displace the thoughts that might lead to his taking revenge. In effect, there has been a reshaping of vengeful behavior into the expression of hostile suspicions and witty verbal attacks that are reinforced strongly because they punish his foes and avoid more aversively bitter thoughts about his dreadful situation. Since he is making his foes suffer, an act of blood revenge can seem less urgent except when he stops to reflect. He can think and speak hatefully, but the role in which he does this is not one that leads to plotting and acting revenge. While Hamlet is absorbed in the antic role, he cannot see the full effect of the role on himself: "Am I a coward?" (566).

It is not true, then, that Hamlet has failed to act; he has acted, but more as an actor than in acts leading to violent revenge. What an actor actually does and does not do points to another aspect of Hamlet's relation to the actor that he does not seem to see. When he speaks of what the actor would "do" if he had a revenge motive, he seems to mean that the actor would do terrifying deeds, but all he literally says is that the actor would display great emotion. Actors emote and they speak daggers, but the theatrical mode of action does not include actual stabbing. This may imply that any role undertaken in an actorly way will not lead to "real" action even if strong emotion is felt. Condemning himself for not being like the actor, Hamlet suggests the way he is like the actor in asserting that he "can say nothing" (564), as if speaking is what is demanded of him. Of course he means that he cannot even say anything against the evils he sees, let alone do anything. If he saw the opposite irony, that he has said a great deal, he would attack himself for it at this point, rather than later in the speech when he does see it. In this again he shows how absorbed he is in his own conceit as he does not see how he is like the actor in the way his conceit moves his soul to "say" much in a great outpouring of passion.

It is sometimes suggested that in this soliloquy Hamlet attempts to whip himself into a passion so he can "put on" the revenger role. But in concentrating on how he is unlike the actor, Hamlet does not suggest that he thinks he is imitating the actor in his passion. Indeed, nothing Hamlet says suggests he has the deliberate intention of working himself into a vengeful passion, and in such a passionate tirade, what is said expresses what is felt and thought unless there are indications to the contrary. It is true that his expression of rage is reinforced because it works up his hatred of Claudius, but if Hamlet were thinking of working himself into a vengeful passion, he would likely emphasize his reasons to hate his foe more than he does. He does mention early in his self-condemnation that a "damn'd defeat was made" upon his father, but the passive construction implies that his anger even in saying this is not immediately directed against the agent of this damnable act (566), and following this for several lines his anger is entirely directed against himself. At this moment Hamlet's thought and feeling are turned away from pursuing revenge because, ironically, thoughts about his failure to take revenge absorb him in an expression of shame that threatens to perpetuate the failure it reacts.
against.

Hamlet expresses his shame by imagining someone insulting him as a nobleman might mock a coward. If this shows that Hamlet is especially concerned about how others judge him, it may suggest that his selfcondemnation is not fully internalized. It seems clear, however, that the person who insults Hamlet is Prince Hamlet himself. Up to this point, the text gives no hint that anyone else alive knows he has any reason for such shame. Thus he evidently attributes his view of himself and his ideals of noble action to an imaginary interlocutor (his father?) in order to punish himself severely for his shameful inaction. In the process of condemning himself, Hamlet finally states what he has failed to do, and so his anger is more or less automatically directed against Claudius, too (574-7). But immediately he rejects such passionately vengeful verbal assaults as inappropriate (578-83)—another likely indication that he has not been intentionally whipping himself up into such a passion thinking that it would move him toward revenge.

Hamlet's reason for rejecting his passionate speech is not that he thinks his emotion is like an actor's and hence invalid and unlikely to lead to action. Instead, he continues to focus on how his behavior is shameful, saying he has been "like a whore" in unpacking his heart with words (581-3). Hamlet's repetition of base terms for prostitutes implies that he means they are base, weak people who curse their lot but do not change what they do, and he thinks that his cursing shows him to be like them, that his cursing will not lead to action. Thus Hamlet does not consciously relate his rejection of unpacking his heart with words to his ideas about the actor, does not think he has behaved like an actor. He has not been markedly histrionic here in an unconscious sense, either. He has the motive and the cue for the passion he expresses in the soliloquy and is not responding with emotions in excess of what his whole situation provokes. All the world's a stage at this moment especially in the sense that Hamlet as the tragic character he is—and is becoming—feels and thinks in a way that absorbs him in a perspective preventing him from seeing fully how this very absorption affects him.

Hamlet rejects his passion when his guilt and shame, which first turned him toward passion, turn him away from passion as itself shameful. There is psychological complexity here, as Hamlet first responds to the actor and then to his own response to the actor. A secondary cause of Hamlet's rejection of passion may be that the strong expression of a behavior causes it to weaken so that another becomes prepotent and replaces it. Or in Elizabethan terms, perhaps Hamlet has expended his passion so that he only has the energy needed to think of what he should do (cf. 3.2.191-2, 4.7.113-17).

As Hamlet withdraws from absorption in passion into cool thinking, he examines his idea of using "The Murder of Gonzago" to catch the conscience of the King. As many critics have suggested, it may be that Hamlet no sooner finishes condemning himself for having delayed revenge than he finds a rationalization for further delay. This view does not depend on his rationale for the delay being a poor one; rather, even if a rationale is sound, it is a rationalization if it is in part reinforced as an avoidance of behavior that would be aversive. Yet our suspicion that Hamlet rationalizes should be tempered by relief that he has thought to raise the question whether he can trust the Ghost's word, and hence for the first time moves toward a resolution of the moral issues concerning the revenge (2.2.594-600).

Interpreters often assume that delay is bad, if not because it prevents revenge, then because for Elizabethans it was a sign that Hamlet has a weak character. However, most writers in the tradition I have reviewed say furious anger, not delay, is a weakness and they recommend delay in order to gain time to cool off and think better about what to do—even if revenge is still to be pursued as a result of careful thinking. Some writers recommend almost any rationale or rationalization to prevent angry, unthinking revenge.9 Thus although in the Nicomachean Ethics Aristotle recommends a moderate anger that can be controlled by reason to carry out forceful actions such as revenge (1125b-6b, 1149a-b), most writers thought anger is difficult to restrain, that it tends to become immoderate and take control from reason.
Seneca writes on the danger of injustice to others in anger because in that emotional state we defend harsh judgments and resist any evidence or thought opposed to our hostility ("On Anger" bk 1, ch. 18, sec. 1-2; ch. 19, sec. 1). In anger a person acts rashly, meaning in haste and without due consideration. In his essay on "How One Ought to Governe His Will," Montaigne especially condemns angry, rash action as lacking discretion and therefore being ineffective, but he too couples angry indiscretion with injustice, and this second fault of rashness is important in the long tradition of writings on this subject (3:259, cf. Plutarch "On the Control" 458c-60c). Hamlet makes an issue of rashness by going against the traditional view and praising it as having assisted him in sending Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to death (5.2.6-11). The issue is whether rash "indiscretion" does serve him well when he judges others, or whether his anger makes it reinforcing for him to condemn those he thinks are evil on the basis of inadequate evidence.

In his exposition of the Sermon on the Mount, Augustine writes of rashness as the sin of condemning others for the mote in their eye while ignoring the beam in one's own eye. He says that "those parties especially judge rashly respecting things that are uncertain, and readily find fault, who love rather to censure and to condemn than to amend and to improve, which is a fault arising either from pride or from envy . . ." (bk 2, ch. 19, sec. 63). If anger is of long duration, it hardens into hatred, and then a person "cannot wish to convert" his foe (sec. 63). When men who hate reprove evil in others, "they are acting a part which does not belong to them; just like hypocrites, who conceal under a mask what they are, and show themselves off in a mask what they are not" (sec. 64). Especially troublesome are those "who, while they take up complaints against all kinds of faults from hatred and spite, also wish to appear counsellors." And then follows a passage which scholars think Shakespeare might well have drawn on for important statements on this theme in Measure for Measure:

And therefore we must piously and cautiously watch, so that when necessity shall compel us to find fault with or rebuke any one, we may reflect first whether the fault is such as we have never had, or one from which we have now become free; and if we have never had it, let us reflect that we are men, and might have had it; but if we have had it, and are now free from it, let the common infirmity touch the memory, that not hatred but pity may go before that fault-finding or administering of rebuke . . . (Sec. 64)

Jesus's statement that how we judge others determines how God will judge us means that the "very same rashness wherewith you punish another must necessarily punish yourself" (ch. 18, sec. 62).

Hamlet's behavior repeatedly invites comparison with Augustine's hate-filled reprover who does not see how his hatred compromises the integrity of his view of others and who is finally punished through his own rashness. In Act 3 his preaching as "Virtue" to his mother's "Vice" while he stands unpunished over the body of a man he has rashly killed may be an instance of reproving another for evil while disregarding a greater evil of one's own. I will especially argue that Augustine's ideas about rashness help to explain the psychology of Hamlet's dooming Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and how he is then killed when he judges Laertes to be like himself and a noble youth.

In considering Hamlet's soliloquy at the end of Act 2, however, my main point about rashness is that the dangers of indiscretion probably justify Hamlet's delay. But the dangers of indiscretion are also manifest in the thinking Hamlet does when he cools off in this soliloquy and speaks of his scheme for using "The Murder of Gonzago." He speaks more coolly, but his hatred for Claudius is still at a peak. In wanting to test the conscience of the King, Hamlet thinks well insofar as it is true that the Ghost might be a devil lying to him in order to tempt him to murder. But Hamlet does not think of the corollary to this that Elizabethans would easily have thought of, that the devil can tell truths to tempt us to evil—as Macbeth learns, for example. Even if his uncle is guilty, it may be damnable for Hamlet to kill him, especially if this is done as a hate-filled act of private revenge and not as a political act to displace a regicide from the throne.
Hamlet's failure to think this through can be explained as avoidance. In the first part of the soliloquy he reaches a passionate conviction that he must take revenge, and he has a scheme to allay his anxiety that he might damn himself. But his hatred of Claudius makes it reinforcing to think in a biased way: he says not that he will test the conscience of the King, but that he will "catch" it—he speaks as if he has already found the King guilty (2.2.601). Claudius needs only to flinch at the sight of a staged murder to doom himself (593). When Hamlet is thus disposed it would be aversive for him to consider further whether his scheme will really resolve the moral question about revenge. Now, especially, when he has felt great shame for taking no action, and when his hatred of Claudius has been roused to a peak of intensity, it will be reinforcing to think only of actions which clearly lead to revenge or clearly end the need for revenge. He feels good about this resolution of his dilemma, and it would arouse great anxiety to think that his scheme may fail in some way.

This reading does not preclude the possibility that while Hamlet is strongly disposed to think here that he wants to take revenge, the plan he has hit upon is reinforced also because it rationalizes avoiding revenge. The strong conscious desire to kill Claudius may thus co-exist with factors tending to cause Hamlet not to kill him. Hamlet may have a revulsion against killing, he may hate the thought of the whole sordid business, he may fear failure and death, or death as a result of killing, as he evidently fears damnation. And he may delay because he unconsciously identifies Oedipally with his uncle.

In the "To be or not to be" soliloquy, Hamlet is still in the relatively calm if intensely absorbed state that marked the end of the 2.2 soliloquy. Just before Hamlet begins to speak in 3.1, we learn that Claudius, the villain, has a conscience which functions in a straightforward way, causing him pain when he is reminded of his guilt (49-54). Hamlet, however, questions the value of conscience by arguing that it prevents the enactment of important undertakings (56-88). This contrast of course does not show that the villain has a better conscience than the protagonist, but it raises an interesting question about how to compare them. The King's speech may mostly serve to show that a suffering conscience is no guarantee of moral behavior and so prepare us to accept Hamlet's probing toward a more sophisticated view of conscience in the soliloquy.

Because this soliloquy has been interpreted in many ways, it will help to provide a summary of what I think is the most obvious way to read the surface meaning of the speech, as a basis for further discussion. Ostensibly, the question is whether to live or die, and the criterion for the answer is which is nobler if to live is to suffer life's torments passively and to die is to fight against myriad evils and be killed in the unequal contest against the King (56-60). Hamlet finds death desirable so long as he can think of it as a peaceful state of dreamless sleep (60-4). He is perhaps too absorbed in his reverie to think of the Ghost (78-80), but perhaps Hamlet's experience with that spirit evokes the thought that death can be a state of nightmare torment (65-8). The fear of this torment is all that keeps us from committing suicide to escape life's pains (66-83). Thus conscience makes cowards of us all by making us fear punishment for suicide or for carrying out "enterprises of great pitch and moment" such as "taking arms" against a foe. The resolution to act is sickened into pallid thinking about the possible consequences of our actions (83-8).

Although Hamlet's judgment of conscience is negative, it may arise from a more honest conscience than most. Hamlet acknowledges that he longs to escape the evils of the world and that he refrains from suicide or revenge not because he feels they are morally wrong, but because such acts may be punished after death. In this Hamlet is honest about his conscience, saying he does not deeply accept its moral judgments, yet is afraid to disobey it. Hamlet errs, however, in saying that fear makes "us all" obey conscience. Since Claudius has just mentioned his conscience, we note that it has not kept him from doing evil, and various enterprises proceed apace in Hamlet's world undaunted by conscience.

Indeed, Hamlet reveals here a more potent conscience than most. Although his frustration may make it reinforcing to condemn his conscience as mere cowardice, he says he has felt compelled to obey it. His concern not to cause his own damnation is serious, for he has referred to it in each of his major soliloquies, in 1.2, at the end of 2.2, and again here. Originally this concern may have been an opportune rationalization to
justify the avoidance of deeds—suicide or revenge—he could not bring himself to perform for other reasons. But in order to work as a rationalization, this concern had to be believable to Hamlet as an intention. Therefore as an intention it can act as a rule guiding his behavior as long as it and the behavior it guides continue to be reinforced. There may be another rationalization here, too. Torn between his nobility and his morality, Hamlet's saying all humans suffer his malaise lets him see his problem as a general one he should not blame himself for too much.

Perhaps Hamlet is both drawn to and diverted from taking revenge because it will lead to his death: drawn to revenge because it will lead to death as escape (60), diverted from it if this makes him see revenge as a form of suicide and hence a cause of damnation. Also, he may think of a mode of revenge that will result in his death (taking arms against a sea of troubles), because suicidal behavior—not including consciously suicidal thoughts—is strongly reinforced even when he intends to think of a revenge action. In this sense suicide may be a theme from the very beginning of the speech, and it can be linked with Hamlet's desire for nobility, which is also expressed in the heroic imagery of taking arms against a sea of troubles.

The strength of noble thoughts for Hamlet can perhaps especially be seen in his discounting conscience as mere cowardice. His disposition to be concerned about integrity and virtue suggests that he would usually value conscience, but when behavior that violates his conscience is strongly reinforced as noble, his thinking alters. Hamlet illustrates very richly the way thought and action can change with changing circumstances and with changes in the behavior that is prepotent.

A psychological analysis should also take into account Hamlet's agony of soul in this soliloquy. Conscience in the sense of "consciousness" achieves a victory here as Hamlet is able to open his eyes wide to the painful conditions of human life as he sees them. Even if he has unknowingly made his world seem worse to him than it is, he shows the tragic figure's capacity to question deeply and to suffer heroically. Hamlet exemplifies Marsilio Ficino's tragic conception of Promethean man, great in his intellectual capacity, but in his use of intellect "uncertain, vacillating, and distressed," "made wretched by the . . . most ravenous of vultures, that is, by the torment of inquiry" (208).

This is the first of two scenes in which Hamlet speaks a monologue while another character seems to be praying (cf. 3.3). Comparison of the two speeches leads to the question of why Hamlet no longer thinks of fears of damnation in the prayer scene. The scene with Ophelia that follows the "To be or not to be" soliloquy is also paralleled in the scene with his mother that follows the prayer scene. Comparison of Hamlet's bitter attacks on Ophelia and Gertrude strengthens the impression that his disposition toward his mother at least partly shapes his response to Ophelia. "Frailty, thy name is woman" (1.2.146). Hamlet does not attack Ophelia only because he is bitter at his mother, however. Ophelia returns his love-tokens, and he shows that this hurts him when he replies by denying he has ever given her anything (3.1.93-6). This reply hurts Ophelia, and her response appears to be an effort to retaliate, since she says he has proved "unkind" (97-102). Then this speech of Ophelia's, in turn, may well evoke Hamlet's attack, which begins immediately in his line "Ha, ha! Are you honest?" (103). He may think she is dishonest because she accuses him of being unkind when she is the one who ended their courtship, or because he senses the falseness of her pose of religious devotion when she has brought all the tokens he has given her and has a self-righteous couplet ready that rhymes her "noble mind" with his having proved "unkind" (100-1).

Hamlet's feelings toward his mother and Ophelia heighten each other here. His mother's behavior has disposed him to be angry at all women as frail, and hence to be reinforced for attacking them. Then he is hurt by Ophelia's rejection and angered by her dishonesty, which in turn may make him think more specifically of his mother. Thinking of his mother presumably increases his anger, and it evidently contributes greatly to the specific things he says—many of his particular accusations seem to be much more strongly evoked by his mother's conduct than Ophelia's (esp. 111-15, 136-51). Thus Hamlet and Ophelia at first attack each other in a vicious circle of hurt provoking greater hurt, and Hamlet's bitterness toward his mother feeds his responses to
Ophelia and is fed by Ophelia's responses to him, so that his attack is savagely in excess of anything Ophelia has done to provoke him.

Insofar as Ophelia's rejection hurts Hamlet, it appears not only that he loved her once, as he says at one point (115), but also that he still feels love for her. In telling her to go to a nunnery, he intends to help her escape from corruption and from the evil he feels welling up in himself (121-31). Although "nunnery" could mean "brothel" here as part of his attack on Ophelia, the context each time he uses this word suggests that she should go to the nunnery to escape from evil. Hamlet is profoundly ambivalent toward Ophelia here: he knows their love cannot survive what is to happen, and he is bitter at his mother, Ophelia, and himself for complicity in creating their hopeless situation. Indeed, his attack on Ophelia may be an expression of ambivalence, since it may partly be reinforced as behavior that will end her love for him and so lessen her suffering as well as his for the loss of their love. Hamlet's behavior can be reinforced both by this consequence and by the hurt inflicted on Ophelia.

This analysis of why Hamlet unleashes his tirade against Ophelia obviates the need to assume that at some point he realizes they are being spied upon: if Ophelia's behavior seems dishonest to him, he may infer on this basis that they are being watched. But does Hamlet behave as though he thinks they are being watched? Does he shape his attack to create a certain impression on an audience, perhaps the usual impression that he is mad? The evidence that he tries to affect a hidden audience more directly, such as his reference to his vengefulness and the statement that one who is married will not live, can instead be used to argue that he is not aware of having a hidden audience, since these lines betray his secret purpose (125, 150). But the crucial point is that if Hamlet pretends at all, this does not prevent his becoming caught up in an emotional tirade. In this scene he is first so absorbed in his meditation that he does not notice Ophelia; then when he does notice her, he is drawn from his meditative mood into a nearly hysterical state, and he remains at this pitch of intensity until just before his exit.

Hamlet's instructions to the actors and his dialogue with Horatio in 3.2 show that when he is not with those who provoke his passion or evoke his antic role he is capable of normal behavior. He may especially urge the players to hold the mirror up to nature in their acting (1-35) because their performance must be natural enough to catch the conscience of the King by mirroring his guilty image. Although Hamlet is moved in expressing his admiration and affection to Horatio, his emotion is not unbalanced and it subsides immediately when he begins to explain his purpose for staging "The Murder of Gonzago" (54-87). Hamlet is presumably moved to praise Horatio as a man who is not passion's slave partly in response to the pain of his own passionate behavior. Yet, whatever regret he feels for his passion does not seem to include regret that it has most recently hurt Ophelia. He plays cruelly with her feelings as part of his antic performance for the court following this dialogue with Horatio (108-49). Telling Horatio that "I must be idle" as the others enter (90), Hamlet indicates that he quite deliberately puts on the antic disposition, yet his wit has a hectic quality suggesting he is caught up in the excitement of his expectation of triumph over Claudius. In this excitement he finds it especially reinforcing to gloat in the power of his wit to make everyone squirm, and Ophelia is easy for him to victimize.

Hamlet identifies the murderer in the play-within-the-play as the "nephew to the King" (3.2.239). In some interpretations this reveals that Hamlet unconsciously identifies with Claudius as the murderer who killed his father. This is possible, but there are also more immediate causes to consider. Hamlet now thinks that he wants to kill the King and so may speak in a way that identifies himself with the murderer of the King because it would be reinforcing for him to kill King Claudius, and he may not notice the import of his words if it would be aversive for him to see that he reveals his purpose. He can be unaware that he identifies himself as the murderer, for his statement about the murderer's identity is evidently a fact in "The Murder of Gonzago," and he need only see this to explain his behavior to himself. Further, his excitement and his hatred could make frightening the King so reinforcing that Hamlet blurts out these words without noticing how they undermine his avowed purpose in staging the play by making it uncertain whether the King's emotional response to the play is guilt or fear.
Once again it is also possible that Hamlet, without being aware of it, recoils from killing the King, so that the statement that the murderer is the nephew of the King is reinforced because it warns Claudius of the threat Hamlet poses. Since Hamlet thinks he wants to kill the King, however, he would find it aversive to think he recoils from the deed, so awareness of this will likely be repressed. Saying the murderer is the nephew of the King may then be reinforced because frightening the King is one kind of revenge still possible for Hamlet. According to this view Hamlet is ambivalent: two opposed behaviors are strong in him, to revenge and not to revenge, and each controls what he says and does in some degree.

Others in the court think the play threatens or falsely accuses Claudius, and the only reason Hamlet can be so sure of his interpretation of Claudius's reaction is that he knows what others do not, that the play mirrors the Ghost's story. But this suggests that Hamlet's interpretation is at least partly based on a prejudgment and on his hatred of the King which makes it reinforcing for him to find confirmation of the King's guilt. Horatio's agreement with Hamlet's view might show that the King's reaction is unambiguously a guilty one except that Hamlet has shared his knowledge and his prejudgment with his friend. Horatio is not embroiled in Hamlet's personal passions, but he has the same "reasons" to see the King as guilty. To Horatio, as to Hamlet, the King's reaction to the play itself is the thing to watch and there is no reason to relate Hamlet's remark about the nephew of the King to the moment of testing the King's conscience. When the King reacts strongly to the murder, Hamlet and Horatio therefore see no reason to doubt that his reaction is guilt and not fear, or horror that Hamlet should falsely accuse him of so awful a crime. Yet the courtiers who are ignorant of the Ghost's "facts" and Hamlet's reason to focus on the play by itself will interpret the episode as a whole, so that Hamlet's remarks about the play appear to convey his purpose for staging it. The play scene shows how much our responses to events depend on complex contingencies of character, situation, and point of view.

Although Hamlet's situation may lead him to err about the King's reaction to the play, the King is nevertheless guilty and presumably should be punished. But Hamlet's thinking about Claudius also affects his thinking about others, and his actions against them are not so justified. His treatment of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern here seems especially erring. Between 2.2 and late in the play scene, they have reported their observations of Hamlet to the King and Queen (3.1.1-28), but in that episode there is no sign they are evil spies or that their report is not intended to help the King and Queen cure their friend. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern think Hamlet is suffering from melancholy and hence needs to be helped by friends in a manipulative way, and nothing the King and Queen say to them suggests any motive other than to restore Hamlet to health.

The dialogue of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern with Hamlet following the play-within-the-play shows how tragedy arises from mutual misunderstanding. Hamlet thinks he has proven the King's guilt, and in his excitement he does not seem to understand that his friends think he has threatened to kill the King instead (as they say in 3.3.8-23). Their speeches to Hamlet have a tone of impatience and rebuke. In the first part of the dialogue, Guildenstern's impatience gradually increases as Hamlet interrupts with what his friend can only perceive as irresponsible wit (3.2.289-310). Guildenstern feels that Hamlet has behaved outrageously and he dares to be openly critical of these interruptions (300-1, 306-10). On his side, Hamlet is offended by his friends' manner and by their taking what appears to be the King's point of view. Unable to see the possible alternative causes of his friends' conduct, Hamlet evidently infers betrayal. This inference would be reinforced because it fits his earlier suspicions of them and his general view that all at court are corrupt.

The episode reaches its crisis when Rosencrantz halfexasperatedly and half-imploringly says "My lord, you once did love me" (326). But it is too late—Hamlet now interprets everything by his inference that his old friends have betrayed him (327-63). What seems a sincere if desperate and pathetically ill-timed plea for Hamlet to let his friends help him evokes a response that they are only trying to trap him and to play upon him. Guildenstern's last effort to reach Hamlet is "O my lord, if my duty be too bold, my love is too unmannerly" (339-40). This statement expresses the traditional idea that an honest friend or courtier who loves his prince should tell him boldly but courteously when he does wrong and should seek to help him improve his conduct (Castiglione 297; bk 4). The statement is certainly not too hard to explicate for a person.
of Hamlet's wit—Guildenstern claims that he has been doing his duty and that if he has been too bold in doing it, he is motivated by his love of Hamlet, which transcends mere courtesy and custom. Hamlet's response epitomizes the tragic theme of the scene: "I do not well understand that" (341). When Polonius enters, once again there is mutual misunderstanding caused partly by Hamlet's absorption in his own point of view. As explained earlier, Hamlet thinks he shows Polonius to be a fool by playing the Fool while Polonius evidently thinks of himself as humoring a madman (367-76). Hamlet remarks that these men are pushing him to the extremity of the role of Fool (375), but once again his absorption in the narrow viewpoint of his antic disposition, coupled with his excited and threatening behavior, contributes to the folly of what happens.

Thus Hamlet is tightly enclosed in his alienated vision by the end of the scene, when he asks to be left alone. The first lines of his soliloquy echo the imagery of hellish midnight in the speech of Lucianus, suggesting that Hamlet has now come to think as the murderer does, that the nephew of the King has become Lucianus (249-54, 379-83). This parallel prompts comparison of the revenger's psychology with the murderer's, and we may wish we could find that Hamlet is exaggerating his murderousness as a way to work himself up to kill Claudius. But Hamlet is already worked up to a demonic pitch at the start of the soliloquy, and in his second sentence he begins to cool as drinking hot blood is something he merely says he "could" do (381). Following this he thinks only of how he should behave when he goes to his mother.

But why does Hamlet go to Gertrude instead of killing the King now that he is convinced his revenge is just and he feels ready to do bitter business? The first lines of the soliloquy imply that he takes for granted that in his present mood he is already prepared to act vengefully, and it seems this is why his attention so quickly focusses on the need to separate his violent intentions regarding the King from his purposes regarding his mother. Hamlet sees the danger of killing her, too, in his rage, but not the reverse of this, that thoughts about not using daggers on his mother, but speaking them, may divert him from stabbing the King.

The vehemence of Hamlet's attack on Gertrude in the closet scene suggests that the main cause of his deciding, in this soliloquy, to go to her and not to the King is that speaking daggers to her is powerfully reinforced. Then, too, his mother has asked to see him now. Her request could function as a conscious pretext for delaying his revenge if going to her is partly reinforced because it enables him to escape from anxiety associated with killing his uncle. Nothing Hamlet says in this soliloquy suggests, however, that he perceives himself to be delaying revenge in a sense that casts doubt on his strength of purpose.

Hamlet's monologue in the prayer scene is an extreme example of absorbed thinking that narrowly focuses only on one way of analyzing a situation (3.3.73-96). He analyzes what revenge demands if he is to seek full retribution for what his father has suffered, but the analysis becomes more and more passionate as it proceeds, and he does not consider what he will do to himself by deliberately seeking to damn Claudius. Since Hamlet is familiar with ideas about self-damning acts, we may infer that he has heard (or could figure out for himself) that to seek someone's damnation is such an act. Earlier he has repeatedly expressed a concern that he should not damn himself. Now, however, his newly confirmed hatred of Claudius makes it so reinforcing to think of damning his foe that such thoughts are entirely absorbing, entirely prepotent over thoughts which would lead away from such a goal, so that any concern about damning himself is repressed.

Nonetheless, killing Claudius could still be aversive to Hamlet for any or all of the reasons reviewed earlier and also, at this moment, because it would be horrible to kill a person in the attitude of prayer. Hamlet's passionate determination to damn his uncle may then be regarded as a rationalization, enabling him to delay revenge and also to avoid thinking he does so for any purpose except to punish Claudius more severely. If, however, Hamlet's idea that he wants to damn his uncle is at all a rationalization, it is a passionate one and may become his purpose. Indeed, even if this rationale were a totally false explanation of Hamlet's behavior, once it occurs to him and is strongly reinforced as his purpose because of his anger and because it justifies his delay, it can guide future behavior as an intention—a discriminative stimulus. The reinforcement of this way of thinking could cause it to become strong behavior for Hamlet to seek the damnation of his foes.
The view that Hamlet spares the King at prayer partly because he so urgently wants to confront his mother appears to be confirmed in the closet scene. Hamlet's purpose and his anger so totally absorb him that he is nearly oblivious of all else. He brushes aside his mother's efforts to lecture him (3.4.8-19); her wrongdoing, not his, is the issue. He says he will set up a mirror to show her the innermost parts of herself, but he has no mirror to show him how his rage might evoke her cry for help (3.4.17-21). In some performances, Hamlet draws his sword to keep his mother from leaving, or still has it in his hand from the preceding scene, and he unthinkingly holds it up so its blade can be like a mirror turned toward her. Somehow it seems to Gertrude, as she cries out, that Hamlet's speaking daggers is about to become physical action. Then Polonius, too, cries out, startling Hamlet in his rage so that he reacts "rashly" and stabs through the arras. The act of stabbing is powerfully reinforced because Hamlet is in such a rage, and the person stabbed might be almost any of the several people he now hates. This stabbing could also be reinforced because it strikes at a foe while avoiding the aversive process of preparing a purposeful revenge. Indeed, this stabbing could conceivably be reinforced as well because it might allow Hamlet to avoid a purposeful revenge altogether by resulting in his being restrained from future action. In any case, Hamlet's words suggest that he does not consciously think it is the King behind the arras as he stabs. His mother asks him what he has done and he says he does not know; then he asks whether it was the King (25-6). At most he hoped it was the King as he stabbed.

When his mother reproaches him for his "rash and bloody deed" (27), Hamlet minimizes what he has done, not only to avoid guilt but also because he is now so strongly reinforced for speaking daggers to her that he will not let anything divert him. His deed is, he allows, "Almost as bad" as hers of killing a king and marrying his brother (28-9). His absorption in her evil will not let Hamlet see how his killing Polonius undercuts his righteous indignation, showing him to be rash in the sense of attacking others' vices while overlooking his own. Gertrude's surprise at the accusation of murder (30) appears to convince Hamlet that she did not know of that crime, since after this he reproaches her only for her marriage to Claudius. If Hamlet no longer thinks she is guilty of murder, then evidently his thoughts about her relationship with Claudius are enough to absorb him intensely. On the other hand, if he continues to think she is guilty of murder, his preoccupation with this relationship is so strong that thoughts of the murder are crowded out.

Hamlet also judges rashly in putting all the blame on Polonius for his own death. Hamlet says Polonius was a "wretched, rash, intruding fool" (31), but if he saw how these words could apply to himself he would not use them so scornfully of Polonius. Hamlet's statement that Polonius has been too "busy" may also apply to himself (33). In the Elizabethan translation of Plutarch's moral essays by Philemon Holland, a person who looks for evil in others while not seeing his own faults is called a busybody ("Of Curiosity").

"I took thee for thy better" again reveals more about Hamlet than about his victim (32). Hamlet now finds it reinforcing to believe that when he stabbed he thought it was the King behind the arras. Moreover, these words say the King is Polonius's "better," suggesting that Hamlet vaguely rationalizes Polonius's death as not very significant because he is a social inferior. Hamlet's thinking here is at least as strongly rooted in princely ideology as in morality, since he does not believe Claudius is morally better than Polonius. Later the same kind of judgment is part of Hamlet's attitude toward Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, when he speaks of their "baser nature" as contrasted with Claudius as well as himself (5.2.60-2).

Hamlet brushes aside his mother's anguish over what he has done and insists that she should let him wring her heart (3.4.34-5). Hard as his own heart has been toward Polonius, he now suggests that "damned custom" has "braz'd" her heart so it is "proof and bulwark against sense" (36-8). Especially in the context of the other ironies here, these lines suggest that as "custom" or habit is hardening Hamlet to hate and scorn most of the people in his world, he is losing his sensitivity to others' suffering and his ability to see from any point of view but his own.

Gertrude's responses show that he "roars" and "thunders" in his tirade against her (52; cf. 39-40). Later in the scene Hamlet claims that he is "cruel only to be kind" (180), that he speaks daggers only to bring Gertrude to
repentance. But he does not assert this intention until the Ghost makes him look to his own behavior as well as hers. Before going to her chamber he has said he would be cruel to her, would speak daggers to her so she would be "shent" (3.2.387-90). Editors have usually been kind to Hamlet by glossing "shent" as "rebuked," "reproved," or "censured." The Oxford English Dictionary tells us, however, that to shend is to disgrace, to put to shame or confusion; to blame, revile, or scold; to destroy, ruin or injure, including to disfigure, corrupt, infect, soil, and defile. That Hamlet intends something like this in saying he will shend her is clear when he says the shending must be only in words and not also in murderous deeds that would confirm the thrust of his words (389-90).

Before the Ghost comes, there is no indication Hamlet intends to do anything except force his mother to see her inmost evils in order to hurt her. He may also have a dim intention to bring her to repentance, but if he does have such an intention, it is in some degree a rationalization, since in his extreme anger his behavior is of a sort that seems more calculated to "Make mad the guilty" than to enlighten her (2.2.558). Hamlet gives no hint of any compassionate understanding; indeed, he takes the view that Gertrude's behavior has been well-nigh incomprehensible in human terms (3.4.63-81). When she says Hamlet has succeeded in making her see her corrupt nature, he continues to stab with his imaginings of her vile sexual encounters with Claudius (88-94). She replies that his "words like daggers enter in my ears," confirming that he has sufficiently spoken daggers to her if he is attacking her only so she will repent (94-96). Yet when she says this, Hamlet intensifies his attack (96-103).

If Hamlet's purpose were to bring her to repentance, he would by now begin to preach as he does later in the scene when this becomes his stated purpose. As it is, his attack is ended only by the Ghost, who expresses fear for what the "conceit" Hamlet has forced on his mother's soul may do to her, and urges him to help her (112-15). To argue thus that Hamlet's attacking Gertrude is reinforced because it punishes her is not to say this is the only cause of his behavior. The Oedipal attachment makes speaking daggers to her be reinforced as a way to create emotional intimacy between them as they break down together. In addition, hurting his mother, especially speaking daggers to her, could be reinforced as a form of sexual sadism.

The re-appearance of the Ghost causes thoughts of using daggers to become prepotent over speaking them for Hamlet. Even before the Ghost speaks, its presence reminds Hamlet of its command and he thinks of how he has been "tardy" in his revenge (107-9). Hamlet's saying he is "laps'd in . . . passion" is interestingly ambiguous: he probably means he has let the passion for revenge lapse in himself, but part of the cause for this is that he has lapsed into passion, has failed to act as much because of the passions he has experienced as because he has lacked passion.

The Queen sees no Ghost and so her thoughts are turned from her own sins to Hamlet's madness. The situation is similar to the start of the scene, as Gertrude and Hamlet see each other to be erring, but they are now more compassionate toward each other and more aware of a need to respond to the other's point of view. Gertrude pities her son for his madness, and because she does not see the Ghost, Hamlet thinks he must explain his behavior to show that he is sane and therefore to be listened to when he tells her about herself (142-51). It would be very reinforcing for Hamlet to believe his explanation that his purpose has only been to move her to repentance (151-7)—especially after the Ghost has urged him to help her—and not that he spoke earlier in vengeful rage.

Thus Hamlet may sincerely think he was cruel "only" to be kind (180), yet his thinking this is also a defensive rationalization. His rationalization becomes extreme when he asks Gertrude to forgive his "virtue" and personifies himself as Virtue in deploring how Virtue must beg pardon and bow and "woo" to be allowed to help Vice reform (154-7). He did not speak in a submissively courteous tone earlier, and the body of Polonius lying on the stage shows that Hamlet is wildly mistaken to regard himself as so near to Virtue.
Hamlet urges Gertrude to reform by habituating herself to sexual abstinence (159-72). He knows that being moved to repentance is not enough, that if she is really to change, her sexual behavior must be habituated so she will no longer desire Claudius. Ironically, Hamlet's statement also applies to the way he himself is changing through his own actions and thoughts, becoming brazed to killing and perhaps "mad in craft" (190). At the moment, however, his intention to reform Gertrude and his thinking of himself as virtuous make it reinforcing for him to repent the killing of Polonius (174-9). Hamlet accepts responsibility for his deed (178-9), and he also speaks of his revenge as a punishment of himself. In this he shows how aversive he finds the Ghost's command: "heaven hath pleas'd it so, / To punish me with this and this with me, / That I must be their scourge and minister" (175-7).

This part of what he says also weakens his repentance insofar as he claims that he did Heaven's will in slaying Polonius. For the first time Hamlet hints that revenge requires the death of more than Claudius, and it seems he thinks this way chiefly because such thoughts allow him to feel justified for killing Polonius. It would be much less aversive to think Heaven has used him to punish Polonius, and through him the King, than to think he has killed a foolish old man in a wild rage. It may even be less aversive to think of himself as a damned agent of God—one meaning of "scourge"—than to think he is a damned agent of his own murderous rage in an act that foolishly dooms himself and has no moral or political value at all. If this reading is correct, Hamlet's concern with his mother's repentance and his turning to repentance himself have deeply ironic consequences insofar as his repentance leads him to see the death of Polonius as providential.

The plurality of evil ones who are to die is next expanded to include Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Hamlet thinks they know he is to be killed when they reach England, for he speaks of destroying them with the weapon they mean to use against him (206-11). Their dialogue with Claudius in 3.3 shows, however, that they believe Hamlet is to be sent to England because he has threatened the King; there is no evidence anywhere that they think the King's sealed commission orders Hamlet's death.

The nature of Hamlet's error in wanting to kill Rosencrantz and Guildenstern is revealed when he takes pleasure in anticipating their destruction, speaking of the "sport" of hoisting the engineer with his own petard, and saying "'tis most sweet / When in one line two crafts directly meet" (208, 211-12). To find it "most sweet" to pit deadly craft against deadly craft is to be essentially "mad in craft" in proto-behaviorist terms, for the pleasure shows that such craftiness is becoming a habit and therefore a characteristic of Hamlet. By the end of the scene, these thoughts have led Hamlet away from repentance for slaying Polonius: as he removes the body he expresses a sportful, mocking contempt that minimizes the importance of the slaying (213-18). In addition, once Hamlet's preoccupation with his mother is out of the way here, his intensely pleasurable anticipation of destroying Rosencrantz and Guildenstern is prepotent over any movement toward killing the King. Hamlet accepts his being sent to England, and here he seems almost to welcome it as an occasion to kill his former friends. Thinking of this kind may well be reinforced partly because it allows him to avoid killing Claudius.

This analysis of the closet scene illustrates how a behaviorist interpretation can unfold the moment-to-moment dynamics of a drama. Particularly valuable is what such an analysis suggests about the importance of thoughts and intentions and how they change. At one moment Hamlet may not have a very clear intention in mind, as perhaps in his rage at the beginning of the scene. Then when the Ghost has prompted him to cease this rage and his mother's doubts of his sanity make it highly reinforcing for him to explain himself, he thinks of an acceptable rationale for his behavior. He is reinforced in believing this rationale by the assurance it gives him that he has behaved sanely and even virtuously. Hence it becomes his sincere intention to reform his mother, and this intention guides his behavior as he tells her how to reform. This brings him to thoughts of his own need to repent, but then he finds it reinforcing to think his actions are fulfilling the intentions of Heaven and he widens his revenge to include Polonius. Once Polonius is seen as having fallen under Heaven's doom, the revenge can widen further, to include Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Thus intentions can control behavior, but the intentions are part of the behavior and are subject to the same contingencies of reinforcement as other activities.
This view of Hamlet does not mean he is insincere in his concern for virtue or his mother. He intensely feels what he says at each moment; indeed, it is the intensity of his sincere thinking which so absorbs him. And it is not that Hamlet behaves in merely contradictory ways. The changes in his behavior reflect a coherent character, a character having the complexity to be moved in complex ways as the action unfolds.

In my initial discussion of the antic disposition I said that some of Hamlet's behavior in Act 4, scenes 2 and 3 may be out of control. Thus his saying that he has "Safely stowed" Polonius's body seems out of touch with reality if he thinks he has adequately disposed of the body by putting it in the lobby upstairs. Hamlet has evidently been absorbed in hiding the body and thinking about its being safely stowed, for when he is called he expresses surprise, as if he has been wakened from preoccupation: "Safely stowed. [Calling within.] But soft, what noise? Who calls on Hamlet? O, here they come" (4.2.1-3). Most of what Hamlet says in these scenes, however, has the tone of the antic wit at its highest pitch of controlled intensity, and any element of apparent madness may reflect hectic excitement. Certainly Hamlet now has cause to play the antic disposition as madly as possible to give the impression that he has not "murdered" Polonius but killed him in a mad fit. Hamlet's concern with seeking cover by hiding the body of Polonius and then hiding himself in his antic disposition blocks any action against the King. Hamlet's anxiety about confronting his foes after he has killed Polonius evidently makes self-concealment prepotent over other behavior.

Hamlet's soliloquy in response to the sight of Fortinbras's army invites comparison with the soliloquy at the end of Act 2. Again Hamlet's disposition to act nobly makes it reinforcing to punish himself when he sees someone who acts vigorously with less cause than he himself has to act (4.4.32-66). As before, he suspects himself of cowardice, but now he denies that he lacks will and strength and more explicitly blames his disposition, as an intellectual and a Christian moralist, to think about outcomes. As a subject in the psychological sense, he is divided between the disposition to nobility and honor and the disposition to think morally. He defends reason as given by God, but disparages careful foresight as more cowardly than wise. Hamlet does not question the validity of the reasoning he did earlier so much as he suggests that his thinking was to justify a delay caused mostly by fear: "some craven scruple / Of thinking too precisely on th'event— / A thought which, quarter'd, hath but one part wisdom / And ever three parts coward—" (40-3). Hamlet here accuses himself of what we call rationalization. There are references to rationalization in other works of Shakespeare, but Hamlet is one of the few characters to ever see it in himself.

Yet Hamlet has little insight here. When he thinks of cowardice as an explanation of his delay, he examines himself no further. The accusation of cowardice is especially painful to a prince, and hence is especially reinforced as punishment. Hamlet wants to discredit himself, but his conclusion that he has been a coward, though it may have some truth, allows him to avoid probing for other causes of delay, some of which might discredit him more. Thus he uses Fortinbras as a model to torment himself with the thought that he has failed to act greatly when his honor is at stake: "a father kill'd, a mother stain'd, / Excitements of my reason and my blood" (57-8). His emotion makes it reinforcing for him to think that henceforth his thoughts must "be bloody or be nothing worth" (66)—he does not want any "thinking too precisely on th'event" to block the bloody deed of revenge. Evidently he intends no longer to think of how he may damn himself or others in what he does, since such thoughts about consequences have especially delayed his revenge. But Hamlet's passionate concern for honor in thinking about "th'event" makes it reinforcing for him to renounce the kind of thinking necessary for truly honorable action. Ironically, to avoid the dishonor of thinking himself a coward, he may think in a way that leads him to act dishonorably in the treacherous means he uses to destroy Rosencrantz and Guildenstern.

Hamlet does not appear again until he returns from the voyage to England, but in 4.6 his letter to Horatio shows he is not a coward in the ordinary sense, for he was the first to board a pirate ship when it attacked. We cannot say, however, that he did this in order to return to Denmark for revenge. Hamlet's apparent purpose was to help repel the pirates, and he became a prisoner when the pirates then broke off the fight (4.6.15-18).
Hamlet and Horatio enter in the graveyard scene as the First Gravedigger sings of his youth and love while digging Ophelia's grave:

HAM. Has this fellow no feeling of his business a sings in grave-making?
HOR. Custom hath made it in him a property of easiness.
HAM. 'Tis e'en so, the hand of little employment hath the daintier sense.

(5.1.65-9)

These lines refer to the proto-behaviorist idea that the most unpleasant activities become easy and even pleasant through habituation. The passage recalls Hamlet's suggestion that his mother has been so "braz'd" or hardened to sin by habit that she may be incapable of sensing the evil of what she has done (3.4.35-8). In 5.1 perhaps more than in the closet scene the statement about habituation raises a question about Hamlet, inasmuch as the Gravedigger is less a character than a figure whose primary function is to be a mirror held up to Hamlet's antic disposition as this disposition fades.

Thus the statement about the Gravedigger's habituation leads to the question whether Hamlet now finds it easy to jest about death, too. If Hamlet comes to terms with death here, he does so on the basis of a hardening of his sensitivities in which he excludes awareness of matters that might cause him pain. By now Hamlet has killed Polonius with his own hand, has used his hand to write Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's death warrant, and has fought the pirates in hand-to-hand combat, so perhaps his hand is no longer the "hand of little employment" that has "the daintier sense" of death. Hamlet may be insensitive in part because he avoids thinking of the deaths of Polonius and his father: the graveyard evokes no remark at all about either of them.13

Hamlet's response to death here shows no grief or compassion until his personal relationship with Yorick begins to bring death closer to him. Until then, the single exception tends to confirm this generalization, for it comes at the start in what Hamlet says about the Gravedigger's insensitivity that lets him treat a skull as though he did not know it "had a tongue in it, and could sing once" (74). After this through line 115 there is no sign that Hamlet responds to death as destroying a creature capable of song. Hamlet's comments on death in these lines take a sardonic view of life as a base pursuit of worldly goods that death shows to be futile. Although a similar view is found in Christian thinking, there the idea is to renounce worldly values for the sake of the soul. Nowhere in this scene does Hamlet express any hope, or any concern for the human soul. In this part of the graveyard scene, Hamlet's only regret seems to be that death ends all distinctions of social class. He comments that the Sexton's spade striking Lady Worm's skull is "fine revolution," and he continues, "Did these bones cost no more the breeding but to play at loggets with 'em? Mine ache to think on't" (87-91). We hear this complaint again when the Gravedigger insolently equivocates in answering his question of who the grave is for, and Hamlet says that "the age is grown so picked that the toe of the peasant comes so near the heel of the courtier he galls his kibe" (135-8). Yet even in these complaints Hamlet gives the impression that he feels detached from individual human lives and deaths.

Hamlet shows he is detached, too, in the way his concern about the Gravedigger's insolence diverts him from the question about whose grave is being dug, immediately after he has been told it is for a woman, to the question of how long the fellow has been digging graves (130-8). We know that this is Ophelia's grave, and as we respond to the structure of this scene we are waiting for Hamlet to be jolted out of his impersonal attitude by the news of her death. Hence the statement that a woman had died prompts us to think Hamlet should ask who it is—not be so easily diverted—if he is really concerned and not merely curious in his questioning.

Even when the Gravedigger unearths the skull of Yorick, Hamlet responds with personal feeling only briefly. Soon Yorick's skull becomes an impersonal symbol to use in expressing the traditional warning that the life of the flesh is transitory, that we should remember death (178-89). Again, Hamlet says nothing of the soul; instead he follows the skull into the earth and comments on the "base uses" to which "we may return"
Hamlet's thinking continues to be narrowly focussed even in the words that express the part of the traditional *memento mori* idea he does utter: "Now get you to my lady's chamber and tell her, let her paint an inch thick, to this favour she must come. Make her laugh at that" (186-9). Hamlet has no intuition that his lady is already dead. Only his ignorance lets him speak this way: he has not fully hardened into a person who can laugh at death, for when Ophelia's body is brought in he is overcome with emotion.

Hamlet's use of Yorick's skull as a symbol and his speaking of his lady as a social type lead him back to his concern about how death makes noble bones ache: "Dost thou think Alexander looked o' this fashion i'th' earth?" (191-2). Hamlet's perception that death brings human greatness to "base uses" moves him to a deep sense of loss that he counters with irony: "O that that earth which kept the world in awe / Should patch a wall t'expel the winter's flaw" (208-9). These lines do not express an acceptance of death that frees Hamlet to act but a tragic prince's concern with death as the destroyer of human greatness. Paradoxically, Hamlet's disposition as tragic prince has displaced concern for the soul, choked off compassion for the loss of song, and provoked scorn of petty worldlings.

When Hamlet asks "Why, may not imagination trace the noble dust of Alexander till a find it stopping a bung-hole?" (196-8), Horatio's reply, "Twere to consider too curiously to consider so" aptly indicates how Hamlet's thinking has led him away from what he most needs to think about if he is to act effectively or greatly (199). In ancient, medieval, and Renaissance writers "curiosity" is often used to mean a vice of inquiring about things in a way that leads to the wrong kind of knowledge. Even so free a thinker as Montaigne sometimes uses "curiosity" in this sense (esp. "Apologie" 2.199, "Upon Some Verses” 3:95, 97). Hamlet's thinking that minimizes character and spirit as essential greatness does not lead him to think about the fundamental moral and human qualities which his particular greatness depends on. The narrowness of Hamlet's thinking is emphasized by the juxtaposition of his concern for greatness with the entrance of Ophelia's funeral procession. She is a pathetic, not a tragic figure, a victim of the struggle between "mighty opposites." As her body is carried on stage, Hamlet's sensibility could not be further from an intuition of her death.

When he sees that Ophelia is dead, Hamlet becomes so emotionally distracted that for a time he loses his ability to recognize how his killing Polonius has affected Laertes and Ophelia (5.1.239-42, 247-56, 283-5). That Hamlet actually cannot think how he may have offended Laertes—"Hear you, sir, / What is the reason that you use me thus? / I lov'd you ever" (283-5)—may also show how strongly he represses awareness that he has killed Polonius. Laertes has forcefully reminded Hamlet that he killed Polonius (239-42), and it may be part of the point that Laertes's description of Hamlet as a "cursed" one who has committed a "wicked deed" presents the Prince with an image of himself which he cannot recognize. When he later says that the image of his own cause shows him the portraiture of Laertes's revenge—Laertes sees the parallel between himself and Laertes as revengers, but evidently does not see how from Laertes's point of view he appears only as Claudius does to himself, as the murderer of his father—Laertes knows nothing of Hamlet's revenge cause. Again Hamlet interprets a mirror held up to him in a way that reflects his absorption in his own point of view.

Insofar as Hamlet's failures in 5.1 are caused by the overwhelming shock and anguish he feels upon learning of Ophelia's death, sympathy for him is evoked throughout this episode, even in response to his seemingly empty protestations of what he would do to show his love for her. Hamlet is reinforced for thinking and speaking in a way that powerfully expresses his love for Ophelia and thereby not incidentally denies any guilt for her death. This is not to say, however, that he deliberately puts on emotional shows, since Hamlet most needs to convince himself, and he will not be convinced by emotional protestations he sees he is putting on. At the end of his tirade he realizes that he has spoken rant—it has become characteristic of Hamlet to recoil from his own emotionality—but it is in his next speech that he is least in touch with reality, asking Laertes how he has offended him (283-5).
The crucial evidence that Hamlet feels what his words claim he feels about Ophelia is the way he speaks with righteous indignation as though he were simply a faithful lover who has a right to object when his lady's grieving brother expresses great love for her (261-6). In this Hamlet is so preposterously oblivious to the realities that he is probably sincere. In saying he will match Laertes's expressions of grief, Hamlet does not see that Laertes's grief is heightened to a furious passion by vengeful anger. Hamlet says "I will fight with him upon this theme / Until my eyelids will no longer wag" (261-2), meaning the theme of who loved Ophelia more, but this is not the theme upon which Laertes wishes to fight.

Hamlet is calm at the beginning of 5.2, perhaps partly because of the influence of Horatio and partly because passion spends itself (see esp. 5.1.279-83; cf. 3.2.189-92, 4.7.109-14). Here a crucial question is what to make of Hamlet's belief that he has been guided by providence in having Rosencrantz and Guildenstern killed in England. I have explained that according to the traditional meaning of rashness, it is doubtful that Hamlet should praise rashness as a mode of providential action. Hamlet's belief that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern have betrayed his friendship is what makes him so bitter toward them. The evidence, however, does not so clearly support Hamlet's suspicions as to justify sending them to death with no chance of defending themselves. And if they did not know the content of the King's sealed orders, once he destroyed those orders Hamlet had no need to have them killed for fear they would have sought to contrive his death in England.

The text of 5.2.6-48 and the relation of this to what Hamlet says at the end of the closet scene indicate that Hamlet was guided by habit, not providence, when he stole the King's commission and forged a replacement. In part Hamlet believes he was guided by providence because before he could address his "brains" regarding what they should do, they began to write a new scenario (30-1) in the forged commission: that is, he wrote intuitively, without thinking first. But his action here carries out his earlier intention to use craft to destroy Rosencrantz and Guildenstern through the means that were to be used for his own destruction (3.4.206-11). The thought of forging a commission for their deaths is precisely what could be expected to occur intuitively to Hamlet when he finds a commission for his death and is disposed to hoist the engineer with his own petard. There is also evidence that Hamlet acted intuitively on the basis of habit in the suggestion that he took pleasure in forging a new commission—he certainly is excited and pleased as he tells Horatio about it (5.2.38-55). Hamlet's pleasure suggests that he was "mad in craft," habituated to its "most sweet" "sport," so that he is insensitive to the reality of what he has done.

Hamlet's thinking seems paranoid when he says he was "benetted round with villainies" (29). Although the sealed commission has proven only the King's villainy, Hamlet forged orders that would harm only Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. This was an opportunity for Hamlet to act as the rightful King of Denmark, but what he says does not indicate he thought of this, and what he wrote was a parody of the voice of Claudius in the original commission, using fair words to cover a treacherous deed (32-47). Hamlet indicates no awareness that he has come to be at all like Claudius in craftiness or that his actions have been base. He especially shows insensitivity to the substance of his act when he emphasizes the style of handwriting he employed. His perception of what is base here is that he once thought it "baseness" to write clearly, so he labored to un-learn his ability to write in a clear hand (32-6). Yet his earlier learning—the habit of being able to write clearly—still survives, and this habit enabled him to write "fair" or clear copy. That he applies his concern for what is "fair" only to clarity of handwriting parallels the insensitivity of his reference to "baseness." And perhaps it is significant that even fairness in handwriting was an earlier habit Hamlet has practiced to overcome.

When Hamlet turns to "Th'effect" of what he wrote (37), his concern is more with the statesman's rhetorical style than with the substance of his command (38-47). Hamlet is gleeful as he tells of piling up clauses to parody this style, and as he puns on "as" and "ass" (43). This speech contains eight lines of mock-rhetoric and one-and-one-half lines telling what he commanded, that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern should be "put to sudden death / Not shriving-time allow'd" (46-7). Horatio's question about how he sealed the forged commission evokes the response that "even in that was heaven ordinant" (47-8). The "even" here suggests
Hamlet finds it reinforcing to think Heaven was ordinant in the action he has just been narrating. He feels that Heaven has approved of what he has done when he says his indiscretion has served him "well" and this shows there's a Divinity that shapes our ends (8-10). Moreover, his entire narrative has a self-satisfied tone, and he goes on to say that the fate of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern does not "come near" his conscience (58).

But if Heaven was ordinant in Hamlet's sending Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to death without shriving time—an evil if not Satanic act—this could only mean that Heaven used Hamlet as an evil instrument of its vengeance. Since Rosencrantz and Guildenstern may have been guilty of betraying Hamlet, he may have been justified in having them executed and also in having this done "Without debatement further more or less" so they could not argue that he was the one to be killed (45). But Hamlet could have stopped here or he could have used other words to emphasize and enforce his point than "not shriving time allow'd." In their context these words go beyond callousness to suggest that Hamlet feels some gratification at having found justification for letting Rosencrantz and Guildenstern be damned. He draws attention to the nature of his act by his following claim that Heaven has guided him. However guilty Rosencrantz and Guildenstern may be, in a Christian context they should not be deprived of a rite that they, at least, might think could save their souls. Hamlet's judgment is deeply tragic as his sense of destiny and right lead him into this dreadful error.

Hamlet does not claim that when he acted on board the ship he thought Heaven was guiding him. He says he did not think about what he was doing, but simply did it intuitively. This may suggest that his idea about providence is a rationalization after the fact to explain and justify his intuitive behavior. Once he has sent Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to death, Hamlet would find it very reinforcing to believe that Heaven directed his actions, but he indicates that he was conscious of his crafty wit at the time he forged the lethal commission, and this challenges his claim that he was not guiding his own conduct. Yet his self-satisfied tone indicates Hamlet is sincere now in thinking providence guided him, and because he believes this, faith in providence can guide his future action.

Ironically, Hamlet's reliance on rashness as providential contributes to his doom. As we saw in the earlier discussion of rashness, Augustine wrote that the rash judge is doomed through his rashness: he judges unjustly, not seeing the "beam" in his own eye while condemning others for "motes," and he is punished through his rash misjudgment of others. Hamlet is killed through his blind trust of Laertes, which is partly caused by his adoption of rashness as providence. Convinced that there is "special providence in the fall of a sparrow," Hamlet now refuses to avoid the potential danger of the fencing match with Laertes (208-20). Hamlet trusts Laertes in a way that expresses the most erring aspect of his rashness. In the graveyard scene he spoke of Laertes as "a very noble youth" (5.1.217), and now he confirms that opinion in saying to Horatio he is sorry he "forgot" himself to Laertes in the graveyard and will "court his favours" (5.2.75-8). This shows that Hamlet still forgets himself to Laertes: Hamlet's reason for being sorry about his earlier behavior is that he sees himself and Laertes to have causes which are the image or portrait of each other, suggesting that Hamlet is inclined to identify with Laertes and to judge him accordingly. But if Hamlet saw his own actions in a clearer light, he would know that he has destroyed Rosencrantz and Guildenstern not nobly but treacherously, so if Laertes is the image of Hamlet, he may be expected to be treacherously vengeful. Thus Hamlet does not expect Laertes's treachery partly because he does not see his own.

To recapitulate the entire ironic pattern of Hamlet's rashness: he judged Rosencrantz and Guildenstern rashly, interpreting their conduct without enough attention to the effect of his behavior on them, assuming they knew they were taking him to his death in England and presuming the nobility and hence justice of his own view. Then this rash judgment led him to doom them rashly, and to avoid guilty thoughts of this he finds it reinforcing, according to the psychology of cognitive dissonance reduction, to think even more strongly than before that his judgment of them was right. This intensifies his sense of himself as noble and hence helps to induce a rash misjudgment of Laertes when he identifies with him. In this sense, the too-harsh judgment of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern is part of what leads to the too-uncritical view of himself and Laertes. To look at it another way, Hamlet's rash judgment of himself helps to induce his opposite misjudgments of
Rosencrantz and Guildenstern as base and of Laertes as noble.

In the dialogue with Osric, the subject is for a time Laertes and his fine qualities, but Hamlet mostly attends to Osric's affectedly elaborate style of speech. In a peculiar way, Osric is another mirror in which Hamlet does not see himself. It is partly because they are both admirers of Laertes that, instead of questioning the substance of what Osric says, Hamlet imitates and parodies his speech (106-23). This echoes Hamlet's account of how he parodied the rhetoric of royal commissions, in which he did not consider the deeper implications of imitating the King. Hamlet says that Osric has collected many things to say by rote or habit, but has no character that can be the source of things to say when he is tested beyond what he has collected (184-91). This, like the play's other statements about habit, invites us to consider whether it applies to Hamlet. Whatever habits Hamlet may have, as his trial reaches its climax in the duel scene what do we see has become of his character? Habits of virtue and vice become characteristics, but has Hamlet become a person whose words and thoughts, however sincere, are habitually rationalizations and other forms of self-justification? Has he become evil or false through the ways he has treated others?

Let us take a wider look at Hamlet's thinking in the last scene. He now insists he should kill the King; indeed, he says he would be damned if he did not end the King's evil deeds (63-70). Here Hamlet comes close to claiming a right in law to execute justice on Claudius. But in giving Claudius's original commission to Horatio to read "at more leisure" (26), Hamlet apparently does not think of using this proof of the King's treachery and criminal injustice to further his cause. Evidently Hamlet's new belief that "divinity" "shapes" his course lets him think he does not need to plan any action of his own (10-11, 73-4, 215-20). His thinking that providence will guide his revenge would be strongly reinforced not only because he has been unable to plan revenge but also because thinking that providence is guiding him enables him to avoid anxiety about what he has done to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern.

Yet even if it is in a sense "self-deceiving" for Hamlet to believe he has acted nobly and that providence guides him here, the most important question is whether these beliefs help him to confront his final trial with integrity and courage. Hamlet is aware of peril and he shows courage in his statement that "The readiness is all" (208-20). On the other hand, because Hamlet's disposition to regard death as a state of "felicity" (352) may be one cause of his readiness, his trust of the King and Laertes in the fencing match might be more suicidal than courageous. Now, it appears to me—as to most interpreters—that following the dialogue with Osric the play primarily emphasizes Hamlet's nobility. His rash judgment of Laertes as noble may be predicated on a faulty self-perception, but—again—even an erring notion sincerely believed in can become an intention guiding future action, and so his perception of Laertes and himself as noble guides him back toward nobility. The one constant in all this, and it is a crucial one, is that Hamlet is always disposed to do what he thinks is noble.

In his speech asking Laertes's forgiveness for slaying his father, Hamlet is noble to Laertes in acknowledging he has done him wrong and in appealing to Laertes's own gentlemanly honor and "most generous thoughts" for pardon (222-3, 227, 238). Still, this could be rhetoric calculated to manipulate Laertes by appealing to his vanity. Also, there seems to be more self-exculpation than honesty in Hamlet's saying his madness and not he killed Polonius (226-35), even though Hamlet could have come to believe he was mad when he killed Polonius because this enables him to avoid more aversive explanations of the act. The most important basis for believing that Hamlet intends to make a true peace with Laertes is that he has stated this intention to Horatio in a context suggesting sincerity (75-80). In sum, although Hamlet's apology to Laertes is surely in part reinforced because it placates a man who might kill him, Hamlet's intention is almost as surely to give an accounting that will be acceptable to a noble person and will preserve his own image of himself as noble. Thus Hamlet may use manipulative rhetoric but avoid the aversive awareness that he is being manipulative.

Of course in this speech Hamlet conceals crucial facts because he thinks he cannot publicly explain that his cause is the image of Laertes's and that he killed Polonius in a moment of vengeful rage at the King and his
mother. Even if Hamlet thinks he deliberately lies in saying his madness and not he killed Polonius, he could be reinforced as a person disposed to be noble if he thinks this is a guiltless lie because the real truth, if he could tell it, would put him in an even better light. Perhaps because Hamlet cannot demonstrate his nobility by explaining to Laertes the facts of his past action, he speaks in a way that expresses his noble character in tone and manner.

Hamlet also acts nobly in fencing with Laertes, showing courage and bending his best efforts to win the match. His not examining the foils despite his suspicion that he is in peril (208-20) may indicate that his conduct is reinforced partly because he is disposed to die. However, not examining the foils also shows he trusts Laertes and so is further evidence he is the noble man the King counted on him to be (4.7.133-5). Hamlet's surprisingly aggressive fencing suggests that despite his brotherly intentions he is strongly reinforced for attacking Laertes. The possible sources of reinforcement here are many: Hamlet intuits his danger and the King's purpose; also, the fencing is an opportunity to take violent action showing the King what he can do and indirectly attacking the King. Hamlet could even attack Laertes as an image or portrait of himself, if this would be reinforcing, without conscious awareness of this as a supplemental source of strength for his action.

Hamlet acts aggressively, too, in things he says. It is disingenuous for him to say that Laertes's skill will contrast brilliantly with his own ignorance (5.2.252-4), for he has told Horatio he expects to "win at the odds" (206-7). More significant, when he has scored two hits to none for Laertes, Hamlet tauntingly suggests that Laertes wants to shame him by not fighting his hardest (301-3). This remark comes at a crucial moment, for Laertes has just indicated in an aside that his conscience makes him reluctant to stab Hamlet (300). In taunting Laertes, Hamlet intends to provoke him to his best effort, but he does not know of this conflict of conscience. Laertes is evidently angered by the taunt (304), tries again to score a hit on Hamlet, fails, and then immediately stabs him when they are not fencing (3056). If Laertes's determination to stab Hamlet has been strengthened by Hamlet's taunt, there is tragic irony in Hamlet's success as a fencer moving him to a moment of hubristic insolence that seals his fate. The tragic irony is intensified in the way the blindness of Hamlet's hubris is caused by his inability to take the role of the other, to put himself in the place of the very man he thinks is an image of himself.

Until Laertes treacherously stabs him, Hamlet has been trusting, and the violation of that trust moves him to a controlled anger and a disposition to take revenge that governs his behavior through the killing of Claudius. Obviously when Hamlet kills Claudius his revenge is for himself and his mother as well as for his father, which allows us to speculate that Hamlet might not have taken revenge even now for his father's death alone or if he himself were able to continue living. But such speculations should not be allowed to obscure the main impression created in Hamlet's slaying of the King, that he acts in a purposeful and composed manner with a sense of full justification. He is noble in his exchange of forgiveness with Laertes, in his concern that Horatio should report his cause "aright," and in turning his dying thoughts to the future of Denmark (337, 344-5, 360-3).

Whatever changes Hamlet undergoes in the course of the play, it is most important that it is always his characteristic disposition to act nobly: he never becomes unjust in Aristotle's sense of being such a person. There is something to the Gravedigger's assertion that an act has three branches, "to act, to do, to perform" (5.1.11-12). In the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle writes that it is "possible for a deed to be unjust without yet being an 'unjust act' if the element of voluntariness is absent" (1135a). Hamlet would act unjustly only if he performed an unjust deed in the way an unjust person does—for the sake of what he knows is an unjust end because he thinks he should act unjustly for the sake of a wrongful motive. In this sense Hamlet never acts unjustly and therefore never becomes an unjust person. Although his deeds and thoughts may become unjust, he never intends to act or think unjustly as an unjust person would. He may acquire the habits and therefore the characteristics of judging rashly and acting craftily, but he does not acquire the habit of thinking he is right to act unjustly—indeed, he does not ever think that what he does is unjust.
These ideas are important, I think, for understanding the complexity of Hamlet's divided subjectivity—the way his intentions and his thinking, his underlying character and his habits, relate to each other in complex and dynamically variable ways as he responds to his changing circumstances. Moreover, if the analysis here has been persuasive, it will be clear that to respond to Hamlet with tragic compassion we must understand him as an imagined person whose behavior can be studied for what it reveals about how and why he thinks, feels, and acts as he does. Only with such an understanding, whether arrived at intuitively or through a psychological analysis, can we see how profoundly erring deeds and perceptions can arise from an intense, sensitive, and anguished concern for love, duty, nobility, and justice.

**Hamlet (Vol. 37): Notes**

1 For the view that Hamlet is psychologically incoherent, see Barker 39-40, Belsey, *Subject* 41-2, and Weimann, "Mimesis," and for an important earlier essay that has contributed to this view, cf. Booth. Ferry sees Hamlet as having an inwardness we can recognize as like our own (2-3), but she is not specifically concerned with the cultural materialist concepts of the subject: see my discussion of these concepts in Chapter 1, 5-22 and my notes there. Ferry argues that the tradition before Shakespeare provides very little sense of the sort of inward life we find in Hamlet. For powerful defenses of the view that Hamlet's character has a certain identity within its great variability, see Frye; Marvin Rosenberg, *The Masks of Hamlet*, esp. ix-xv. Cf. Friedman; Morin; see Cruttwell for an earlier essay with this view, esp. 121-8.

On Hamlet as a subject, cf. also Edward Burns 139-58; Eagleton, *William Shakespeare* 70-3; William O. Scott; States, *Hamlet*; Wilks 100-24; Luke Wilson. Wilks's use of Renaissance ideas of conscience, reason, and passion to analyze Hamlet's moral struggle converges with my analysis on a number of points.

I am not persuaded that the variability of Hamlet can in part be attributed to revisions in the second quarto edition making him a different character from the Hamlet of the first folio edition (see David Ward and also Werstine on this possibility). Thus I use the conflated text of *Hamlet* ed. by Jenkins, not least because I want to discuss the Hamlet of our cultural and critical tradition.

In his book on much the same topic as mine, *Character: Acting and Being on the Pre-Modern Stage*, Edward Burns defends the (near) "absence of psychology" from his "discourse of character" by analyzing Hamlet's response to Horatio's questions about the Danish custom of drinking (155-8). In Burns's reading, Hamlet locates all the "forces and effects" of the subject "outside it," and thus "The subject position, the 'I' from which a Shakespeare 'character' speaks is . . . separate from, anterior to his or her 'character' (in the sense of the word known to Shakespeare) . . ." (157-8). This may justify, as Burns says, not analyzing Shakespeare's characters in terms of a post-romantic notion of the subject which "would locate the reality of” psychological forces such as humoral temperament, reason, and habit "within the individual subjectivity” (158). His logic, however, leads not to a dismissal of psychology but to an analysis based on pre-modern psychology and its formulations of the sort of divided subjectivity Hamlet describes. In premodern discourse we typically find humoral temperament and reason within individual subjectivity, and we certainly find habit within both individual subjectivity and character, with character as habit a crucial source of subjectivity and its expression.

Thus Burns employs an inadequate analysis of premodern psychology, and he also errs in treating Hamlet's speech as a representative explanation of that psychology. Perhaps most importantly, Burns tends to take Hamlet's discourse as Shakespeare's. This is a general tendency in his analyses, deriving from his tight focus on character construction as a rhetorical practice. Rather than tracing the psychological tradition in relation to character, acting, and being, Burns comes to Shakespeare by way of Theophrastian character description, ancient biographical writing, the *Psychomachia* of Prudentius, and the Tudor allegorical drama. Thus Burns tends to write of Hamlet as constructing a subject position or an interiority in his metaphors and his grammar (147, 153; cf. 154, 157-8). Burns argues that Hamlet's use of the infinitive in "To be or not to be,” and also his
of "we" in this soliloquy, show that the speech is an "almost subjectless utterance." Only the "we" suggests "a subject position," and it "evades any sense of a particular subject, any urgent individualism, or special subjectivity" (154). But Hamlet's grammar is not used by him or Shakespeare to construct a subject position in Burns's sense; Hamlet's grammar is an expression of his subjectivity as constructed by Shakespeare in the rhetorical mode of mimesis. Thus Hamlet as speaker expresses his thoughts and feelings about his dilemma, so that the use of the infinitive and "we" conveys Hamlet's characteristic tendency as a subject to think and hence express himself in a generalizing and philosophical manner. The speech also conveys Hamlet's characteristic concern for nobility, and much more—see my analysis in this chapter.

2 For the defense of reading as a mode of character construction and the relation of reading to acting, also see Buzacott 1-13, 88-91, 137; Cole, Acting as Reading; Desmet; Goldman, "Hamlet"; Marvin Rosenberg, Masks of Hamlet ix-xv.

A. C. Bradley held that "the psychological point of view is not equivalent to the tragic . . .," but that to comprehend Hamlet's tragedy it is necessary to understand how and why he thinks and feels as he does (101-2). See again note 2 in Chapter 1.

4 It is impossible to cite all those who have discussed Hamlet's character, but for discussions that at least implicitly consider the psychology of role playing in relation to Hamlet which have not been cited earlier in this chapter regarding this psychology, see esp. Abel 41-58; Allman 211-54; Battenhouse 252-62; Calderwood, To Be, esp. 18-50, and "Hamlet's Readiness"; Calhoun; Cartwright 89-137; Charney, Hamlet's 15-34, Style 267-95; Danson 22-49; Draper 95, 103-5; Eagleton, Shakespeare 39-65; Ellrodt 41-8; Garber, Coming of Age 198-205; Goldman, Shakespeare and the Energies 79-93, Actor's Freedom 146-57 and Acting and Action 17-45; Gorfain, "Toward"; Gottschalk; Granville-Barker 1: 245-50; Greene, "Postures"; Joan Lord Hall 34-48; Hedrick; Peter Holland; Lanham 129-43; Harry Levin, esp. 111-26; Mack, "Engagement" 286-87 and "World"; Mann, esp. 44-53; Nardo 15-34; Paris, "Hamlet"; Rabey; Righter 142-7; Harold Rosenberg 68-102; Marvin Rosenberg, Masks of Hamlet, esp. 167-85; Siemon 108, 116; Soellner 135-8, 172-94; Ure, "Character" 21-8; Van Laan 171-80; Walcutt, esp. 20-32; Weimann, "Mimesis"; David Young 9-44.

5 A number of critics since Bradley have made more than passing mention of the psychology of habits in their interpretations of Hamlet and Hamlet: see Battenhouse 255-9; Calderwood, "Hamlet's Readiness"; Hankins 210-13; McDonald 342-8; Shenk 189-64, Siemon 108, 116; Skulsky 25-6, 44-5; Stirling 72; Walcutt 23-32; Whitaker 271-3. Cf. Parker, who alludes indirectly to the psychology of habits, 108-9.

For Coleridge's thesis on Hamlet and habit, see 158; cf. 175. That habit could have its full traditional meaning for Coleridge is seen in a comment that Claudius does not have the "guilt of habit" because his conscience still speaks (170). Cf. Hazlitt's statement that Shakespeare "has kept up the distinction . . . between the understandings and the moral habits of men" (237).

6 John Keble quotes the Puritan Thomas Cartwright as opposed to wearing mourning clothes because he believed that all outward expressions of mourning provoke a deepening of grief (l:491n). And this was not only the Puritans' idea, for we saw in Chapter 1 that Montaigne believed outward expressions of grief, even insincere ones, induce the feeling. Montaigne's favorite, Plutarch, says in his "Consolation to His Wife" that mourning clothes and other outward displays of sorrow, such as shearing one's hair, make the mind "dispirited, cramped, shut in, deaf to all soothing influences, and a prey to vain terrors' (609F-10A).

7 Here I agree with Nardo's view that to be in "deadly earnest" is opposed to being playful, but I disagree with her view that Hamlet is playful: see Nardo 10-11, 15-34.

As the reader will see, my analysis also finds no basis in the text for the actor to make us aware that he is "playing" Hamlet in any way that would detach him from the character. Hamlet's self-absorption is unusually
intense and should be strongly communicated by the actor to the audience. Hamlet comments on the drama and himself in theatrical terms, but the nature of his comments can always be plausibly construed as expressing his own perspective. This is not to say that we should not infer further metatheatrical commentaries from the text, but these are authorial irony.

8 Now of course if Hamlet were an actual person, it might not be realistic to think of him as so absorbed in his antic disposition when he thinks of his foes that he tends not to think of what to do for revenge. However, we are analyzing the text of Hamlet, in which nearly all that exists of this character after he says he will put on an antic disposition until the news of the actors is his playing that role.

9 For these writers it does not matter that a reason to delay may be self-deceiving or even evil so long as it diverts one until more thought is possible. Thus Montaigne writes of how he diverted a young man from revenge by spurring his ambition to seek honor in rising above revenge in a noble forgiveness, and he says he once diverted himself from revenge with a love affair ("Of Diverting" 3:56-7). Bacon says that in anger the best way to make oneself delay is to think that the time for revenge has not yet come ("Of Anger" 511). Seneca writes that one may tell a person to delay revenge in order to take a heavier revenge later, apparently with the understanding that when the anger has passed, the heavier revenge will not be sought ("On Anger" bk 3, ch. 39, sec. 3). There is a variation on the theme of this kind of thinking in Sidney's Arcadia when Pyrocles is about to commit suicide and a voice, possibly that of "his good angel," urges him first to seek revenge, in order to divert him from his suicidal purpose (483; bk 3, ch. 22, sec. 7).

10 On most important questions, my reading agrees with that of Jenkins in the Arden ed, 484-93.

11 Robert Burton writes of how a friend should keep a melancholy person busy, and, if all else fails, resort to threats and even whipping: 331-3; pt. 2, sec. 2, mem. 6, subs. 2.

12 See Walley on Lucrece, esp. 483-4, and in the plays see passages such as Tro. 2.2.164-74.

13 Hamlet speaks here to other characters, so we cannot assume he says what he feels. However, he generally speaks what he feels to Horatio. Further, the text does not suggest he has any other thoughts, but it does indicate considerable absorption in the narrow line of thought his speech conveys.

Hamlet (Vol. 37): Works Cited


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Hamlet (Vol. 44): Introduction

Hamlet

The psychoanalytical criticism of Hamlet is dominated largely by discussion of Hamlet's apparent oedipal issues, namely his focus on his mother's sexuality and his murderous intentions toward the father-figure in his life, his stepfather (and uncle) Claudius. In fact, Philip Edwards (1985) notes that the psychoanalytical criticism of Hamlet was sparked by a single footnote regarding Hamlet's Oedipus complex in Sigmund Freud's The Interpretation of Dreams (1900). Freud notes that "Hamlet is able to do anything—except take vengeance
on the man who did away with his father and took that father's place with his mother, the man who shows him the repressed wishes of his own childhood realized." In addition to Hamlet's oedipal anxiety, his delay in obtaining revenge as commanded by the ghost is also a source of psychoanalytical study.

C. L. Barber and Richard P. Wheeler (1986) introduce their analysis of Hamlet by reviewing Freud's views on individual and social development. The critics assert that the psychological framework of Hamlet is informed by Hamlet's efforts to "cope with the desecration of his heritage." While they argue that Hamlet's problems cannot be simply reduced to the Oedipus complex, Barber and Wheeler state that an understanding of Hamlet "must be consistent with the presence of that complex, for the Freudian explanation clearly works." Emphasizing Hamlet's guilt, which is focused on his father, not his mother, the critics argue that this guilt refers to Hamlet's wish to kill his father, which he cannot do since Hamlet's father is already dead. The wish, Barber and Wheeler explain, is diverted from Hamlet's father to his uncle. Taking another approach to Hamlet's oedipal issues, Janet Adelman (1992) centers on the role of the mother. Adelman illustrates that in earlier Shakespearean plays, such as Henry IV, the son must choose between two fathers and shapes his own identity in relationship to his image of his father. With the appearance of a mother/wife—Gertrude, in Hamlet—the father takes on a sexual role; this disables the son's relationship with his father and creates in the son a sexualized image of his mother. In Hamlet, Adelman points out, Gertrude's sexuality "is literally the sign of her betrayal and of her husband's death." H. R. Coursen (1982) identifies a number of problems related to the Freudian analysis of Hamlet, including, among others, the tendency of Freudians to focus on Hamlet's inner conflicts, while ignoring the external issues with which Hamlet is faced. After surveying several Freudian analyses of Hamlet, Coursen suggests that a Jungian approach may help clarify some of the problems with Freudian analyses: "the oedipal problem may itself be symptomatic of a deeper disturbance within Hamlet's psyche, that is, his inability to contact his 'feminine soul' or anima." Coursen defines the anima as the energy of the male's recognition and integration into consciousness of "his androgynous nature" and goes on to demonstrate a link between introverted thinking (such as the kind that occupies Hamlet), the fear of women, and the Oedipus complex. While Coursen accepts the Oedipus complex as symptomatic of Hamlet's larger psychological problems, Arthur Kirsch (1981) dismisses the notion that Hamlet is motivated by unconscious psychological fantasies or disturbances. Kirsch argues that "the source of Hamlet's so-called oedipal anxiety is real and present, it is not an archaic and repressed fantasy." Rejecting the idea that Hamlet's thoughts and actions are psychological responses to repressed fantasies, Kirsch argues that they are legitimate reactions to external events, specifically Hamlet's mother's incestuous marriage within a month to his father's brother and murderer. Additionally, Kirsch maintains that "such oedipal echoes" are an inextricable part of Hamlet's grief, and that Hamlet is forced to deal with them while still mourning the death of his father. After reviewing Freud's distinction between grief/mourning and depression/melancholia and noting that Freud fails to incorporate the emotions of anger and protest (against mortality) in his discussion of grief, Kirsch traces Hamlet's personal journey through his grieving process. Kirsch concludes that Hamlet's preoccupation with delay, with the relationship between thought and action, demonstrates that no action "can be commensurate with grief, not even the killing of a guilty king. . . ." Where Kirsch comments on the relationship between Hamlet's grief and the delay of Hamlet's revenge, Joanna Montgomery Byles (1994) focuses on the psychological origins of revenge in Hamlet. Byles discusses the concept of the Freudian superego "as heir to the Oedipus complex, the internalization of parental values and the source of punitive, approving and idealizing attitudes towards the self." In Hamlet, Byles argues, revenge is presented as "an inward tragic event" motivated by the aggression of Hamlet's superego and externalized and emphasized by destructive family relationships. Byles concludes that the delay Hamlet experiences stems from the conflict between his ego and his superego, and by the end of the play, the self-destructive superego wins, and Hamlet dies.

Hamlet (Vol. 44): Overviews

Stephen Booth (essay date 1969)
It is a truth universally acknowledged that *Hamlet* as we have it—usually in a conservative conflation of the second quarto and first folio texts—is not really *Hamlet*. The very fact that the *Hamlet* we know is an editor-made text has furnished an illusion of firm ground for leaping conclusions that discrepancies between the probable and actual actions, statements, tone, and diction of *Hamlet* are accidents of its transmission. Thus, in much the spirit of editors correcting printer's errors, critics have proposed stage directions by which, for example, Hamlet can overhear the plot to test Polonius' diagnosis of Hamlet's affliction, or by which Hamlet can glimpse Polonius and Claudius actually spying on his interview with Ophelia. Either of these will make sense of Hamlet's improbable raging at Ophelia in III.i. The difficulty with such presumably corrective emendation is not only in knowing where to stop, but also in knowing whether to start. I hope to demonstrate that almost everything else in the play has, in its particular kind and scale, an improbability comparable to the improbability of the discrepancy between Hamlet's real and expected behavior to Ophelia; for the moment, I mean only to suggest that those of the elements of the text of *Hamlet* that are incontrovertibly accidental may by their presence have led critics to overestimate the distance between the *Hamlet* we have and the prelapsarian *Hamlet* to which they long to return.

I think also that the history of criticism shows us too ready to indulge a not wholly explicable fancy that in *Hamlet* we behold the frustrated and inarticulate Shakespeare furiously wagging his tail in an effort to tell us something, but, as I said before, the accidents of our texts of *Hamlet* and the alluring analogies they father render *Hamlet* more liable to interpretive assistance than even the other plays of Shakespeare. Moreover, *Hamlet* was of course born into the culture of Western Europe, our culture, whose every thought—literary or nonliterary—is shaped by the Platonic presumption that the reality of anything is other than its apparent self. In such a culture it is no wonder that critics prefer the word *meaning* (which implies effort rather than success) to *saying*, and that in turn they would rather talk about what a work *says* or *shows* (both of which suggest the hidden essence bared of the dross of physicality) than talk about what it *does*. Even stylistic critics are most comfortable and acceptable when they reveal that rhythm, syntax, diction, or (and above all) imagery are vehicles for meaning. Among people to whom "It means a lot to me" says "I value it," in a language where *significant* and *valuable* are synonyms, it was all but inevitable that a work with the peculiarities of *Hamlet* should have been treated as a distinguished and yearning failure.

Perhaps the value of *Hamlet* is where it is most measurable, in the degree to which it fulfills one or another of the fixable identities it suggests for itself or that are suggested for it, but I think that before we choose and argue for one of the ideal forms toward which *Hamlet* seems to be moving, and before we attribute its value to an exaggeration of the degree to which it gets there, it is reasonable to talk about what the play *does* do, and to test the suggestion that in a valued play what it does do is what we value. I propose to look at *Hamlet* for what it undeniably is: a succession of actions upon the understanding of an audience. I set my hypothetical audience to watch *Hamlet* in the text edited by Willard Farnham in The Pelican Shakespeare (Baltimore, 1957), a text presumably too long to have fitted into the daylight available to a two o'clock performance, but still an approximation of what Shakespeare's company played.

I

The action that the first scene of *Hamlet* takes upon the understanding of its audience is like the action of the whole, and most of the individual actions that make up the whole. The first scene is insistently incoherent and
just as insistently coherent. It frustrates and fulfills expectations simultaneously. The challenge and response in the first lines are perfectly predictable sentry-talk, but—as has been well and often observed—the challenger is the wrong man, the relieving sentry and not the one on duty. A similarly faint intellectual uneasiness is provoked when the first personal note in the play sets up expectations that the play then ignores. Francisco says, "For this relief much thanks. 'Tis bitter cold,/ And I am sick at heart" (I.i.8-9). We want to know why he is sick at heart. Several lines later Francisco leaves the stage and is forgotten. The scene continues smoothly as if the audience had never focused on Francisco's heartsickness. Twice in the space of less than a minute the audience has an opportunity to concern itself with a trouble that vanishes from consciousness almost before it is there. The wrong sentry challenges, and the other corrects the oddity instantly. Francisco is sick at heart, but neither he nor Bernardo gives any sign that further comment might be in order. The routine of sentry-go, its special diction, and its commonplaces continue across the audience's momentary tangential journey; the audience returns as if it and not the play had wandered. The audience's sensation of being unexpectedly and very slightly out of step is repeated regularly in *Hamlet*.

The first thing an audience in a theater wants to know is why it is in the theater. Even one that, like Shakespeare's audiences for *Richard II* or *Julius Caesar* or *Hamlet*, knows the story being dramatized wants to hear out the familiar terms of the situation and the terms of the particular new dramatization. Audiences want their bearings and expect them to be given. The first thing we see in *Hamlet* is a pair of sentries. The sight of sentries in real life is insignificant, but, when a work of art focuses on sentries, it is usually a sign that what they are guarding is going to be attacked. Thus, the first answer we have to the question "what is this play about?" is "military threat to a castle and a king," and that leads to our first specific question: "what is that threat?"" Horatio's first question ("What, has this thing appeared again to-night?" I.i.21) is to some extent an answer to the audience's question; its terms are not military, but their implications are appropriately threatening. Bernardo then begins elaborate preparations to tell Horatio what the audience must hear if it is ever to be intellectually comfortable in the play. The audience has slightly adjusted its expectations to accord with a threat that is vaguely supernatural rather than military, but the metaphor of assault in which Bernardo prepares to carry the audience further along its new path of inquiry is pertinent to the one from which it has just deviated:

> Sit down awhile,  
> And let us once again assail your ears,  
> That are so fortified against our story,  
> What we two nights have seen.

(Li.30-33)

We are led toward increased knowledge of the new object—the ghost—in terms appropriate to the one we assumed and have just abandoned—military assault. Bernardo's metaphor is obviously pertinent to his occupation as sentinel, but in the metaphor he is not the defender but the assailant of ears fortified against his story. As the audience listens, its understanding shifts from one system of pertinence to another; but each perceptible change in the direction of our concern or the terms of our thinking is balanced by the repetition of some continuing factor in the scene; the mind of the audience is in constant but gentle flux, always shifting but never completely leaving familiar ground.

Everyone onstage sits down to hear Bernardo speak of the events of the past two nights. The audience is invited to settle its mind for a long and desired explanation. The construction of Bernardo's speech suggests that it will go on for a long time; he takes three lines (I.i.35-38) to arrive at the grammatical subject of his sentence, and then, as he begins another parenthetical delay in his long journey toward a verb, "the bell then beating one," *Enter Ghost*. The interrupting action is not a simple interruption. The description is interrupted by a repetition of the action described. The entrance of the ghost duplicates on a larger scale the kind of mental experience we have had before. It both fulfills and frustrates our expectations: it is what we expect and
desire, an action to account for our attention to sentinels; it is unexpected and unwanted, an interruption in the syntactical routine of the exposition that was on its way to fulfilling the same function. While the ghost is on the stage and during the speculation that immediately follows its departure, the futile efforts of Horatio and the sentries (who, as watchers and waiters, have resembled the audience from the start) are like those of the audience in its quest for information. Marcellus' statement about the ghost is a fair comment on the whole scene: "'Tis gone and will not answer" (I.i.52), and Horatio's "In what particular thought to work I know not" (I.i.67) describes the mental condition evoked in an audience by this particular dramatic presentation of events as well as it does that evoked in the character by the events of the fiction.

Horatio continues from there into the first statement in the play that is responsive to an audience's requirement of an opening scene, an indication of the nature and direction of the play to follow: "But, in the gross and scope of my opinion,/ This bodes some strange eruption to our state" (I.i.68-69). That vague summary of the significance of the ghost is political, but only incidentally so because the audience, which was earlier attuned to political/military considerations, has now given its attention to the ghost. Then, with only the casual preamble of the word state, Marcellus asks a question irrelevant to the audience's newly primary concerns, precisely the question that no one asked when the audience first wanted to know why it was watching the sentries, the question about the fictional situation whose answer would have satisfied the audience's earlier question about its own situation: Marcellus asks "Why this same strict and most observant watch/ So nightly toils the subject of the land" (I.i.71-72). Again what we are given is and is not pertinent to our concerns and expectations. This particular variety among the manifestations of simultaneous and equal propriety and impropriety in Hamlet occurs over and over again. Throughout the play, the audience gets information or sees action it once wanted only after a new interest has superseded the old. For one example, when Horatio, Bernardo, and Marcellus arrive in the second scene (I.ii.159), they come to do what they promise to do at the end of scene one, where they tell the audience that the way to information about the ghost is through young Hamlet. By the time they arrive "where we shall find him most conveniently," the audience has a new concern—the relation of Claudius to Gertrude and of Hamlet to both. Of course interruptions of one train of thought by the introduction of another are not only common in Hamlet but a commonplace of literature in general. However, although the audience's frustrations and the celerity with which it transfers its concern are similar to those of audiences of, say, Dickens, there is the important difference in Hamlet that there are no sharp lines of demarcation. In Hamlet the audience does not so much shift its focus as come to find its focus shifted.

Again the first scene provides a type of the whole. When Marcellus asks why the guard is so strict, his question is rather more violent than not in its divergence from our concern for the boding of the ghost. The answer to Marcellus' question, however, quickly pertains to the subject of ours: Horatio's explanation of the political situation depends from actions of "Our last king,/ Whose image even but now appeared to us" (I.i.80-81), and his description of the activities of young Fortinbras as "The source of this our watch" is harnessed to our concern about the ghost by Bernardo, who says directly, if vaguely, that the political situation is pertinent to the walking of the ghost:

I think it be no other but e'en so.  
Well may it sort that this portentous figure  
Comes armèd through our watch so like the king  
That was and is the question of these wars.

(I.i.108-11)

Horatio reinforces the relevance of politics to ghosts in a long speech about supernatural events on the eve of Julius Caesar's murder. Both these speeches establishing pertinence are good examples of the sort of thing I mean: both seem impertinent digressions, sufficiently so to have been omitted from the folios.
Now for the second time, *Enter Ghost*. The reentrance after a long and wandering digression is in itself an assertion of the continuity, constancy, and unity of the scene. Moreover, the situation into which the ghost reenters is a careful echo of the one into which it first entered, with the difference that the promised length of the earlier exposition is fulfilled in the second. These are the lines surrounding the first entrance; the italics are mine and indicate words, sounds, and substance echoed later:

*Horatio*. Well, sit we down,
And let us hear Bernardo speak of this.

*Bernardo*. Last night of all,
When yond same star that's westward from the pole
Had made his course t' illume that part of heaven
Where now it burns, Marcellus and myself,
The bell then beating one—

*Enter Ghost.*


(I.i.33-40)

Two or three minutes later a similar situation takes shape in words that echo, and in some cases repeat, those at the earlier entrance:

*Marcellus*. Good now, sit down, and tell me he that knows,
Why this same strict and most observant watch,
So nightly toils the subject of the land . . .

. . . . .

*Enter Ghost*

But soft, behold, lo where it comes again!

(I.i.70-72, 126)

After the ghost departs on the crowing of the cock, the conversation, already extravagant and erring before the second apparition when it ranged from Danish history into Roman, meanders into a seemingly gratuitous preoccupation with the demonology of cocks (I.i. 148-65). Then—into a scene that has from the irregularly regular entrance of the two sentinels been a succession of simultaneously expected and unexpected entrances—enters "the morn in russet mantle clad," bringing a great change from darkness to light, from the unknown and unnatural to the known and natural, but also presenting itself personified as another walker, one obviously relevant to the situation and to the discussion of crowing cocks, and one described in subdued but manifold echoes of the two entrances of the ghost. Notice particularly the multitude of different kinds of relationship in which "yon high eastward hill" echoes "yond same star that's westward from the pole":

*But look*, the morn in russet mantle clad
Walks o'er the dew of yon high eastward hill.
*Break we* our watch up. . . .

(I.i. 166-68)
The three speeches (I.i. 148-73—Horatio's on the behavior of ghosts at cockcrow, Marcellus' on cocks at Christmas time, and Horatio's on the dawn) have four major elements running through them: cocks, spirits, sunrise, and the presence or absence of speech. All four are not present all the time, but the speeches have a sound of interconnection and relevance to one another. This at the same time that the substance of Marcellus' speech on Christmas is just as urgently irrelevant to the concerns of the scene. As a gratuitous discussion of Christianity, apparently linked to its context only by an accident of poulterer's lore, it is particularly irrelevant to the moral limits usual to revenge tragedy. The sequence of these last speeches is like the whole scene and the play in being both coherent and incoherent. Watching and comprehending the scene is an intellectual triumph for its audience. From sentence to sentence, from event to event, as the scene goes on it makes the mind of its audience capable of containing materials that seem always about to fly apart. The scene gives its audience a temporary and modest but real experience of being a superhumanly capable mental athlete. The whole play is like that.

During the first scene of *Hamlet* two things are threatened, one in the play, and one by the play. Throughout the scene the characters look at all threats as threats to the state, and specifically to the reigning king. As the king is threatened in scene one, so is the audience's understanding threatened by scene one. The audience wants some solid information about what is going on in this play. Scene one is set in the dark, and it leaves the audience in the dark. The first things the play teaches us to value are the order embodied in the king and the rational sureness, purpose, and order that the play as a play lacks in its first scene. Scene two presents both the desired orders at once and in one—the king, whose name even in scene one was not only synonymous with order but was the regular sign by which order was asserted: the first confusion—who should challenge whom—was resolved in line three by "Long live the king"; and at the entrance of Horatio and Marcellus, Tightness and regularity were vouched for by "Friends to this ground. And liegemen to the Dane." As scene two begins it is everything the audience wanted most in scene one. Here it is daylight, everything is clear, everything is systematic. Unlike scene one, this scene is physically orderly; it begins with a royal procession, businesslike and unmistakable in its identity. Unlike the first scene, the second gives the audience all the information it could desire, and gives it neatly. The direct source of both information and orderliness is Claudius, who addresses himself one by one to the groups on the stage and to the problems of the realm, punctuating the units both with little statements of conclusion like "For all, our thanks" and "So much for him" (I.ii.16, 25), and with the word "now" (I.ii.17, 26, 42, 64), by which he signals each remove to a new listener and topic. Denmark and the play are both now orderly, and are so because of the king. In its specifics, scene two is the opposite of scene one. Moreover, where scene one presented an incoherent surface whose underlying coherence is only faintly felt, this scene is the opposite. In scene one the action taken by the scene—it makes its audience perceive diffusion and fusion, division and unification, difference and likeness at once—is only an incidental element in the action taken or discussed in the scene—the guards have trouble recognizing each other; the defense preparation "does not divide the Sunday from the week," and makes "the night joint-laborer with the day" (I.i.76, 78). In scene two the first subject taken up by Claudius, and the subject of first importance to Hamlet, is itself an instance of improbable unification—the unnatural natural union of Claudius and Gertrude. Where scene one brought its audience to feel coherence in incoherence by response to systems of organization other than those of logical or narrative sequence, scene two brings its audience to think of actions and characters alternately and sometimes nearly simultaneously in systems of value whose contradictory judgments rarely collide in the mind of an audience. From an uneasiness prompted by a sense of lack of order, unity, coherence, and continuity, we have progressed to an uneasiness prompted by a sense of their excess.

Claudius is everything the audience most valued in scene one, but he is also and at once contemptible. His first sentences are unifications in which his discretion overwhelms things whose natures are oppugnate. The simple but contorted statement, "therefore our . . . sister . . . have we . . . taken to wife," takes Claudius more than six lines to say; it is plastered together with a succession of subordinate unnatural unions made smooth by rhythm, alliteration, assonance, and syntactical balance:
Therefore our sometime sister, now our queen,  
Th'imperial jointress to this warlike state,  
Have we, as 'twere with a defeated joy,  
With an auspicious and a dropping eye,  
With mirth in funeral and with dirge in marriage,  
In equal scale weighing delight and dole,  
Taken to wife.

(I.ii.8-14)

What he says is overly orderly. The rhythms and rhetoric by which he connects any contraries, moral or otherwise, are too smooth. Look at the complex phonetic equation that gives a sound of decorousness to the moral indecorum of "With mirth in funeral and with dirge in marriage." Claudius uses syntactical and rhetorical devices for equation by balance—as one would a particularly heavy and greasy cosmetic—to smooth over any inconsistencies whatsoever. Even his incidental diction is of joining: "jointress," "disjoint," "Colleaguéd" (I.ii.9, 20, 21). The excessively lubricated rhetoric by which Claudius makes unnatural connections between moral contraries is as gross and sweaty as the incestuous marriage itself The audience has double and contrary responses to Claudius, the unifier of contraries.

Scene two presents still another kind of double understanding in double frames of reference. Claudius is the primary figure in the hierarchy depicted—he is the king; he is also the character upon whom all the other characters focus their attention; he does most of the talking. An audience focuses its attention on him. On the other hand, one of the members of the royal procession was dressed all in black—a revenger to go with the presumably vengeful ghost in scene one. Moreover, the man in black is probably also the most famous actor in England (or at least of the company). The particulars of the scene make Claudius the focal figure, the genre and the particulars of a given performance focus the audience's attention on Hamlet.

When the two focuses come together ("But now, my cousin Hamlet, and my son—") Hamlet's reply (I.ii.65) is spoken not to the king but to the audience. "A little more than kin, and less than kind" is the first thing spoken by Hamlet and the first thing spoken aside to the audience. With that line Hamlet takes the audience for his own, and gives himself to the audience as its agent on the stage. Hamlet and the audience are from this point in the play more firmly united than any other such pair in Shakespeare, and perhaps in dramatic literature.

Claudius' "my cousin Hamlet, and my son" is typical of his stylistic unifications of mutually exclusive contrary ideas (cousin, son). Hamlet's reply does not unify ideas, but disunifies them (more than kin, less than kind). However, the style in which Hamlet distinguishes is a caricature of Claudius' equations by rhetorical balance; here again, what interrupts the order, threatens coherence, and is strikingly at odds with its preamble is also a continuation by echo of what went before. Hamlet's parody of Claudius and his refusal to be folded into Claudius' rhetorical blanket is satisfying to an audience in need of assurance that it is not alone in its uneasiness at Claudius' rhetoric. On the other hand, the orderliness that the audience valued in scene two is abruptly destroyed by Hamlet's reply. At the moment Hamlet speaks his first line, the audience finds itself the champion of order in Denmark and in the play, and at the same time irrevocably allied to Hamlet—the one present threat to the order of both.

II

The play persists in taking its audience to the brink of intellectual terror. The mind of the audience is rarely far from the intellectual desperation of Claudius in the prayer scene when the systems in which he values his crown and queen collide with those in which he values his soul and peace of mind. For the duration of Hamlet the mind of the audience is as it might be if it could take on, or dared to try to take on, its experience whole, if it dared drop the humanly necessary intellectual crutches of compartmentalization, point of view, definition,
and the idea of relevance, if it dared admit any subject for evaluation into any and all the systems of value to
which at different times one human mind subscribes. The constant occupation of a sane mind is to choose,
establish, and maintain frames of reference for the things of its experience; as the high value placed on artistic
unity attests, one of the attractions of art is that it offers a degree of holiday from that occupation. As the
creation of a human mind, art comes to its audience ready-fitted to the human mind; it has physical limits or
limits of duration; its details are subordinated to one another in a hierarchy of importance. A play guarantees
us that we will not have to select a direction for our attention; it offers us isolation from matter and
considerations irrelevant to a particular focus or a particular subject. *Hamlet* is more nearly an exception to
those rules than other satisfying and bearable works of art. That, perhaps, is the reason so much effort has
gone into interpretations that presume that *Hamlet*, as it is, is not and was not satisfying and bearable. The
subject of literature is often conflict, often conflict of values; but, though the agonies of decision, knowing,
and valuing are often the objects of an audience's concern, an audience rarely undergoes or even approaches
such agonies itself. That it should enjoy doing so seems unlikely, but in *Hamlet* the problems the audience
thinks about and the intellectual action of thinking about them are very similar. *Hamlet* is the tragedy of an
audience that cannot make up its mind.

One of the most efficient, reliable, and usual guarantees of isolation is genre. The appearance of a ghost in
scene one suggests that the play will be a revenge tragedy. *Hamlet* does indeed turn out to be a revenge
tragedy, but here genre does not provide the limited frame of reference that the revenge genre and genres in
general usually establish. The archetypal revenge play is *The Spanish Tragedy*. In the first scene of that, a
ghost and a personification, Revenge, walk out on the stage and spend a whole scene saying who they are,
where they are, why they are there, what has happened, and what will happen. The ghost in *The Spanish
Tragedy* gives more information in the first five lines of the play than there is in the whole first scene of
*Hamlet*. In *The Spanish Tragedy* the ghost and Revenge act as a chorus for the play. They keep the doubt and
turmoil of the characters from ever transferring themselves to the audience. They keep the audience safe from
doubt, safely outside the action, looking on. In *The Spanish Tragedy* the act of revenge is presented as a moral
necessity, just as, say, shooting the villain may be in a Western. Revenge plays were written by Christians and
played to Christian audiences. Similarly, traditional American Westerns were written by and for believers
faithful to the principles of the Constitution of the United States. The possibility that an audience's Christian
belief that vengeance belongs only to God will color its understanding of revenge in *The Spanish Tragedy* is
as unlikely as a modern film audience's consideration of a villain's civil rights when somebody shouts, "Head
him off at the pass." The tension between revenge morality and the audience's own Christian morality was a
source of vitality always available to Kyd and his followers, but one that they did not avail themselves of.
Where they did not ignore moralities foreign to the vaguely Senecan ethic of the genre, they took steps to take
the life out of conflicts between contrary systems of value.

When Christian morality invades a revenge play, as it does in III. xiii of *The Spanish Tragedy* when
Hieronimo says *Vindicta Mihi* and then further echoes St. Paul's "Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the
Lord," the quickly watered-down Christian position and the contrary position for which Hieronimo rejects it
are presented as isolated categories between which the character must and does choose. The conflict is
restricted to the stage and removed from the mind of the audience. The effect is not to make the contrariety of
values a part of the audience's experience but to dispel the value system foreign to the genre, to file it away as,
for the duration of the play, a dead issue. In its operations upon an audience of *The Spanish Tragedy*, the
introduction and rejection of the Christian view of vengeance is roughly comparable to the hundreds of
exchanges in hundreds of Westerns where the new schoolmarm says that the hero should go to the sheriff
rather than try to outdraw the villain. The hero rarely gives an intellectually satisfying reason for taking the
law into his own hands, but the mere fact that the pertinent moral alternative has been mentioned and rejected
is ordinarily sufficient to allow the audience to join the hero in his morality without fear of further interruption
from its own.
The audience of *Hamlet* is not allowed the intellectual comfort of isolation in the one system of values appropriate to the genre. In *Hamlet* the Christian context for valuing is persistently present. In I. V the ghost makes a standard revenge-tragedy statement of Hamlet's moral obligation to kill Claudius. The audience is quite ready to think in that frame of reference and does so. The ghost then—in the same breath—opens the audience's mind to the frame of reference least compatible with the genre. When he forbids vengeance upon Gertrude, he does so in specifically Christian terms: "Taint not thy mind, nor let thy soul contrive/Against thy mother aught. Leave her to heaven . . ." (I. V. 85-86). Moreover, this ghost is at least as concerned that he lost the chance to confess before he died as he is that he lost his life at all.

Most of the time contradictory values do not collide in the audience's consciousness, but the topic of revenge is far from the only instance in which they live anxiously close to one another, so close to one another that, although the audience is not shaken in its faith in either of a pair of conflicting values, its mind remains in the uneasy state common in nonartistic experience but unusual for audiences of plays. The best example is the audience's thinking about suicide during *Hamlet*. The first mention of suicide comes already set into a Christian frame of reference by the clause in which self-slaughter is mentioned: "Or that the Everlasting had not fixed/His canon 'gainst self-slaughter" (I. ii. 131-32). In the course of the play, however, an audience evaluates suicide in all the different systems available to minds outside the comfortable limitations of art; from time to time in the play the audience thinks of suicide variously as (1) cause for damnation, (2) a heroic and generous action, (3) a cowardly action, and (4) a last sure way to peace. The audience moves from one to another system of values with a rapidity that human faith in the rational constancy of the human mind makes seem impossible. Look, for example, at the travels of the mind that listens to and understands what goes on between the specifically Christian death of Laertes (*Laertes*: "...Mine and my father's death come not upon thee./Nor thine on me."—*Hamlet*: "Heaven make thee free of it" V. ii. 319-21) and the specifically Christian death of Hamlet (*Horatio*: "...Good night, sweet prince./And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest . . .") V. ii. 348-48). During the intervening thirty lines the audience and the characters move from the Christian context in which Laertes' soul departs, into the familiar literary context where they can take Horatio's attempted suicide as the generous and heroic act it is (V. ii. 324-31). Audience and characters have likewise no difficulty at all in understanding and accepting the label "felicity" for the destination of the suicide—even though Hamlet, the speaker of "Absent thee from felicity awhile" (V. ii. 336), prefaced the statement with an incidental "By heaven" (V. ii. 332), and even though Hamlet and the audience have spent a lot of time during the preceding three hours actively considering the extent to which a suicide's journey to "the undiscovered country" can be called "felicity" or predicted at all. When "Good night, sweet prince" is spoken by the antique Roman of twenty lines before, both he and the audience return to thinking in a Christian frame of reference, as if they had never been away.

The audience is undisturbed by a nearly endless supply of similar inconstancies in itself and the play; these are a few instances:

The same audience that scorned pretense when Hamlet knew not "seems" in I. ii admires his skill at pretense and detection in the next two acts.

The audience joins Hamlet both in admiration for the self-control by which the player "could force his soul so to his own conceit" that he could cry for Hecuba (II. ii. 537), and in admiration for the very different self-control of Horatio (III. ii. 51-71).

The audience, which presumably could not bear to see a literary hero stab an unarmed man at prayer, sees the justice of Hamlet's self-accusations of delay. The audience also agrees with the ghost when both have a full view of the corpse of Polonius, and when the ghost's diction is an active reminder of the weapon by which Hamlet has just attempted the acting of the dread command: "Do not forget. This visitation/ Is but to whet thy almost blunted purpose" (III. iv. 111-12).
The audience that sees the ghost and hears about its prison house in I.v also accepts the just as obvious truth of "the undiscovered country from whose bourn no traveller returns. . . ."

What have come to be recognized as the problems of Hamlet arise at points where an audience's contrary responses come to consciousness. They are made bearable in performance (though not in recollection) by means similar to those by which the audience is carried across the quieter crises of scene one. In performance, at least, the play gives its audience strength and courage not only to flirt with the frailty of its own understanding but actually to survive conscious experiences of the Polonian foolishness of faith that things will follow only the rules of the particular logic in which we expect to see them. The best example of the audience's endurance of self-knowledge is its experiences of Hamlet's madness. In the last moments of Act I Hamlet makes Horatio, Marcellus, and the audience privy to his intention to pretend madness: " . . . How strange or odd some' er I bear myself/ (As I perchance hereafter shall think meet/ To put an antic disposition on) . . ." (I.v. 170-73). The audience sets out into Act II knowing what Hamlet knows, knowing Hamlet's plans, and secure in its superiority to the characters who do not. (Usually an audience is superior to the central characters: it knows that Desdemona is innocent, Othello does not; it knows what it would do when Lear foolishly divides his kingdom; it knows how Birnam Wood came to come to Dunsinane. In Hamlet, however, the audience never knows what it would have done in Hamlet's situation; in fact, since the King's successful plot in the duel with Laertes changes Hamlet's situation so that he becomes as much the avenger of his own death as of his father's, the audience never knows what Hamlet would have done. Except for brief periods near the end of the play, the audience never has insight or knowledge superior to Hamlet's or, indeed, different from Hamlet's. Instead of having superiority to Hamlet, the audience goes into the second act to share the superiority of Hamlet.) The audience knows that Hamlet will play mad, and its expectations are quickly confirmed. Just seventy-five lines into Act II, Ophelia comes in and describes a kind of behavior in Hamlet that sounds like the behavior of a young man of limited theatrical ability who is pretending to be mad (II.i.77-84). Our confidence that this behavior so puzzling to others is well within our grasp is strengthened by the reminder of the ghost, the immediate cause of the promised pretense, in Ophelia's comparison of Hamlet to a creature "loosèd out of hell/ To speak of horrors."

Before Ophelia's entrance, II.i has presented an example of the baseness and foolishness of Polonius, the character upon whom both the audience and Hamlet exercise their superiority throughout Act II. Polonius seems base because he is arranging to spy on Laertes. He instructs his spy in ways to use the "bait of falsehood"—to find out directions by indirections (II.i.1-74). He is so sure that he knows everything, and so sure that his petty scheme is not only foolproof but brilliant, that he is as contemptible mentally as he is morally. The audience laughs at him because he loses his train of thought in pompous byways, so that, eventually, he forgets what he set out to say: "Where did I leave?" (II.i.50-51). When Ophelia reports Hamlet's behavior, Polonius takes what is apparently Hamlet's bait: "Mad for thy love?" (II.i.85). He also thinks of (and then spends the rest of the act finding evidence for) a specific cause for Hamlet's madness: he is mad for love of Ophelia. The audience knows (1) Hamlet will pretend madness, (2) Polonius is a fool, and (3) what is actually bothering Hamlet. Through the rest of the act, the audience laughs at Polonius for being fooled by Hamlet. It continues to laugh at Polonius' inability to keep his mind on a track (II.ii.85-130); it also laughs at him for the opposite fault—he has a one-track mind and sees anything and everything as evidence that Hamlet is mad for love (II.ii. 173-212; 394-402). Hamlet, whom the audience knows and understands, spends a good part of the rest of the scene making Polonius demonstrate his foolishness.

Then, in Act III, scene one, the wise audience and the foolish Polonius both become lawful espials of Hamlet's meeting with Ophelia. Ophelia says that Hamlet made her believe he loved her. Hamlet's reply might just as well be delivered by the play to the audience: "You should not have believed me . . ." (III.i.117). In his next speech Hamlet appears suddenly, inexplicably, violently, and really mad—this before an audience whose chief identity for the last hour has consisted in its knowledge that Hamlet is only pretending. The audience finds itself guilty of Polonius' foolish confidence in predictable trains of events. It is presented with evidence
for thinking just what it has considered other minds foolish for thinking—that Hamlet is mad, mad for love of
an inconstant girl who has betrayed him. Polonius and the audience are the self-conscious and prideful
knowers and understanders in the play. They both overestimate the degree of safety they have as innocent
onlookers.

When Hamlet seems suddenly mad, the audience is likely for a minute to think that it is mad or that the play is
mad. That happens several times in the course of the play; and the play helps audiences toward the decision
that the trouble is in themselves. Each time the play seems insane, it also is obviously ordered, orderly, all of a
piece. For example, in the case of Hamlet’s truly odd behavior with Ophelia in III.i some of the stuff of his
speeches to her has been otherwise applied but nonetheless present in the play before (fickleness, cosmetics).
Furthermore, after the fact, the play often tells us how we should have reacted; here the King sums up the
results of the Ophelia experiment as if they were exactly what the audience expected they would be (which is
exactly what they were not): “Love? his affections do not that way tend/. . . what he spoke . . . / Was not like
madness” (III.i. 162-64). In the next scene, Hamlet enters perfectly sane, and lecturing, oddly enough, on what
a play should be (III.ii.1-42). Whenever the play seems mad it drifts back into focus as if nothing odd had
happened. The audience is encouraged to agree with the play that nothing did, to assume (as perhaps for other
reasons it should) that its own intellect is inadequate. The audience pulls itself together, and goes on to
another crisis of its understanding. Indeed, it had to do so in order to arrive at the crisis of the nunnery speech.
At exactly the point where the audience receives the information that makes it so vulnerable to Hamlet’s
inexplicable behavior in the nunnery scene, the lines about the antic disposition (I.v. 170-73) act as a much
needed explanation—after the fact of the audience’s discomfort—of jocular behavior by Hamlet (“Art thou
there, truepenny?” “You hear this fellow in the cellarage,” “Well said, old mole!” I.v. 150-51, 162) that is
foreign to his tone and attitude earlier in the scene, and that jars with the expectations aroused by the manner
in which he and the play have been treating the ghost. For a moment, the play seems to be the work of a
madman. Then Hamlet explains what he will do, and the audience is invited to feel lonely in foolishly failing
to understand that that was what he was doing before.

III

The kind of experience an audience has of Hamlet in its large movements is duplicated—and more easily
demonstrated—in the microcosm of its responses to brief passages. For example, the act of following the
exchange initiated by Polonius’ “What do you read, my Lord?” in II.ii is similar to the larger experience of
coping with the whole career of Hamlet’s madness:

Polonius. . . . What do you read, my Lord?

Hamlet. Words, words, words.

Polonius. What is the matter, my lord? Hamlet. Between who?

Polonius. I mean the matter that you read, my lord.

Hamlet. Slanders, sir, for the satirical rogue says here that old men have grey beards, that
their faces are wrinkled, their eyes purging thick amber and plum-tree gum, and that they
have a plentiful lack of wit, together with most weak hams. All which, sir, though I most
powerfully and potently believe, yet I hold it not honesty to have it thus set down, for you
yourself, sir, should be old as I am if, like a crab, you could go backward.

Polonius. [aside] Though this be madness, yet there is method in’t. . . .

(II.ii.190-204)
The audience is full partner in the first two of Hamlet's comically absolute answers. The first answer is not what the questioner expects, and we laugh at the mental inflexibility that makes Polonius prey to frustration in an answer that takes the question literally rather than as it is customarily meant in similar contexts. In his first question Polonius assumes that what he says will have meaning only within the range appropriate to the context in which he speaks. In his second he acts to limit the frame of reference of the first question, but, because "What is the matter?" is a standard idiom in another context, it further widens the range of reasonable but unexpected understanding. On his third try Polonius achieves a question whose range is as limited as his meaning. The audience—composed of smug initiates in Hamlet's masquerade and companions in his cleverness—expects to revel further in the comic revelation of Polonius' limitations. Hamlet's answer begins by letting us laugh at the discomfiture inherent for Polonius in a list of "slanders" of old men. Because of its usual applications, the word "slander" suggests that what is so labeled is not only painful but untrue. Part of the joke here is that these slanders are true. When Hamlet finishes his list, he seems about to continue in the same vein and to demonstrate his madness by saying something like "All which, sir, though . . ., yet are lies." Instead, a syntactical machine ("though . . . yet"), rhetorical emphasis ("powerfully and potently"), and diction ("believe") suitable for the expected denial are used to admit the truth of the slanders: "All which, sir, though I most powerfully and potently believe, yet I hold it not honesty to have it thus set down, for you yourself, sir. . . ." The speech seems to have given up comic play on objection to slanders on grounds of untruth, and to be about to play from an understanding of "slander" as injurious whether true or not. The syntax of "I hold it not honesty . . ., for" signals that a reason for Hamlet's objections will follow, and—in a context where the relevance of the slanders to Polonius gives pain enough to justify suppression of geriatric commonplaces—"for you yourself, sir" signals the probable general direction of the explanation. So far the audience has followed Hamlet's wit without difficulty from one focus to another, but now the bottom falls out from under the audience's own Polonian assumption, in this case the assumption that Hamlet will pretend madness according to pattern: "for you yourself, sir, should be old as I am if, like a crab, you could go backward." This last is exactly the opposite of what Polonius calls it, this is madness without method.

The audience finds itself trying to hear sense in madness; it suddenly undergoes experience of the fact that Polonius' assumptions about cause and effect in life and language are no more arbitrary and vulnerable than its own. The audience has been where it has known that the idea of sanity is insane, but it is there very briefly; it feels momentarily lonely and lost—as it feels when it has failed to get a joke or when a joke has failed to be funny. The play continues blandly across the gulf. Polonius' comment reflects comically on the effects on him of the general subject of old age; the banter between Hamlet and Polonius picks up again; and Polonius continues his self-confident diagnostic asides to the audience. Moreover, the discussion of Hamlet's reading is enclosed by two passages that have strong nonlogical, nonsignificant likeness to one another in the incidental materials they share—breeding, childbearing, death, and walking:

Hamlet. For if the sun breed maggots in a dead dog, being a good kissing carrion—Have you a daughter?

Polonius. I have, my lord.

Hamlet. Let her not walk i' th' sun. Conception is a blessing, but as your daughter may conceive, friend, look to't.

Polonius. [aside] How say you by that? Still harping on my daughter. Yet he knew me not at first. 'A said I was a fishmonger. 'A is far gone, far gone. And truly in my youth I suffered much extremity for love, very near this. I'll speak to him again.—What do you read, my lord?

(II.ii. 181-90)
Polonius. [aside] Though this be madness, yet there is method in't.—Will you walk out of the air, my lord?

Hamlet. Into my grave?

Polonius. Indeed, that's out of the air.[aside] How pregnant sometimes his replies are! a happiness that often madness hits on, which reason and sanity could not so prosperously be delivered of. . . .

(II.ii.203-9)

From beginning to end, in all sizes and kinds of materials, the play offers its audience an actual and continuing experience of perceiving a multitude of intense relationships in an equal multitude of different systems of coherence, systems not subordinated to one another in a hierarchy of relative power. The way to an answer to "What is so good about Hamlet?" may be in an answer to the same question about its most famous part, the "To be or not to be" soliloquy.

The soliloquy sets out with ostentatious deliberation, rationality, and precision. Hamlet fixes and limits his subject with authority and—considering that his carefully defined subject takes in everything humanly conceivable—with remarkable confidence: "To be, or not to be—that is the question." He then restates and further defines the question in four lines that echo the physical proportions of "To be or not to be" (two lines on the positive, two on the negative) and also echo the previous grammatical construction ("to suffer . . . or to take arms"):

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.

(III.i.57-60)

The speech is determinedly methodical about defining a pair of alternatives that should be as easily distinguishable as any pair imaginable; surely being and not being are distinct from one another. The next sentence continues the pattern of infinitives, but it develops the idea of "not to be" instead of continuing the positivenegative alternation followed before:

To die, to sleep—
No more—and by a sleep to say we end
The heartache, and the thousand natural shocks
That flesh is heir to. 'Tis a consummation
Devoutly to be wished.

(III.i.60-64)

As an audience listens to and comprehends the three units "To die," "to sleep," and "No more," some intellectual uneasiness should impinge upon it. "To sleep" is in apposition to "to die," and their equation is usual and perfectly reasonable. However, death and sleep are also a traditional type of unlikeness; they could as well restate "to be or not to be" (to sleep or to die) as "not to be" alone. Moreover, since to die is to sleep, and is also to sleep no more, no vocal emphasis or no amount of editorial punctuation will limit the relationship between "to sleep" and "no more." Thus, when "and by a sleep to say we end . . ." reasserts the
metaphoric equation of death and sleep, the listener feels a sudden and belated need to have heard "no more" as the isolated summary statement attempted by the punctuation of modern texts. What is happening here is that the apparently sure distinction between "to be" and "not to be" is becoming less and less easy to maintain. The process began even in the methodically precise first sentence where passivity to death-dealing slings and arrows described "to be," and the positive aggressive action of taking arms described the negative state, "not to be." Even earlier, the listener experienced a substantially irrelevant instability of relationship when "in the mind" attached first to "nobler," indicating the sphere of the nobility, and then to "suffer," indicating the sphere of the suffering: "nobler in the mind to suffer."

"The thousand natural shocks/ That flesh is heir to" further denies the simplicity of the initial alternatives by opening the mind of the listener to considerations excluded by the isolated question whether it is more pleasant to live or to die; the substance of the phrase is a summary of the pains of life, but its particulars introduce the idea of duty. "Heir" is particularly relevant to the relationship and duty of Hamlet to his father; it also implies a continuation of conditions from generation to generation that is generally antithetical to any assumption of finality in death. The diction of the phrase also carries with it a suggestion of the Christian context in which flesh is heir to the punishment of Adam; the specifically religious word "devoutly" in the next sentence opens the idea of suicide to the Christian ethic from which the narrowed limits of the first sentences had briefly freed it.

While the logical limits and controls of the speech are falling away, its illogical patterns are giving it their own coherence. For example, the constancy of the infinitive construction maintains an impression that the speech is proceeding as methodically as it began; the word "to," in its infinitive use and otherwise, appears thirteen times among the eighty-five words in the first ten lines of the soliloquy. At the same time that the listener is having trouble comprehending the successive contradictions of "To die, to sleep—/ No more—and by a sleep to say we end . . . ," he also hears at the moment of crisis a confirming echo of the first three syllables and word "end" from "and by opposing end them" in the first three syllables and word "end" in "and by a sleep to say we end." As the speech goes on, as it loses more and more of its rational precision, and as "to be" and "not to be" become less and less distinguishable, rhetorical coherence continues in force. The next movement of the speech begins with a direct repetition, in the same metrical position in the line, of the words with which the previous movement began: "To die, to sleep." The new movement seems, as each new movement has seemed, to introduce a restatement of what has gone before; the rhetorical construction of the speech insists that all the speech does is make the distinct natures of "to be" and "not to be" clearer and clearer:

                      To die, to sleep—
                      To sleep—perchance to dream: ay, there's the rub,
                      For in that sleep of death what dreams may come
                      When we have shuffled off this mortal coil,
                      Must give us pause. There's the respect
                      That makes calamity of so long life.

(III.i.64-69)

As Hamlet describes his increasing difficulty in seeing death as the simple opposite of life, the manner of his description gives his listener an actual experience of that difficulty; "shuffled off this mortal coil" says "cast off the turmoil of this life," but "shuffled of f and "coil" both suggest the rejuvenation of a snake which, having once thrown her enamell'd skin, reveals another just like it underneath. The listener also continues to have difficulty with the simple action of understanding; like the nature of the things discussed, the natures of the sentences change as they are perceived: "what dreams may come" is a common construction for a question, and the line that follows sounds like a subordinate continuation of the question; it is not until we hear "must give us pause" that we discover that "what dreams may come" is a noun phrase, the subject of a
declarative sentence that only comes into being with the late appearance of an unexpected verb. In the next sentence ("There's the respect/ That makes calamity of so long life"), logic requires that we understand "makes calamity so long-lived," but our habitual understanding of makes . . . of constructions and our recent indoctrination in the pains of life make us likely to hear the contradictory, illogical, and yet appropriate "makes a long life a calamity."

Again, however, the lines sound ordered and reasonable. The rejected first impressions I have just described are immediately followed by a real question, and one that is largely an insistently long list of things that make life a monotonously painful series of calamities. Moreover, nonlogical coherence is provided by the quiet and intricate harmony of "to dream," "of death," and "shuffled of f" in the metrical centers of three successive lines; by the echo of the solidly metaphoric "there's the rub" in the vague "there's the respect"; and by the repetition of "for" from "For in that sleep" to begin the next section of the speech.

For who would bear the whips and scorns of time,
Th' oppressor's wrong, the proud man's contumely,
The pangs of despised love, the law's delay,
The insolence of office, and the spurns
That patient merit of th' unworthy takes,
When he himself might his quietus make
With a bare bodkin? Who would fardels bear,
To grunt and sweat under a weary life,
But that the dread of something after death,
The undiscovered country, from whose bourn
No traveller returns, puzzles the will,
And makes us rather bear those ills we have
Than fly to others that we know not of?

(III.i.70-82)

Although the list in the first question is disjointed and rhythmically frantic, the impression of disorder is countered by the regularity of the definite article, and by the inherently conjunctive action of six possessives. The possessives in 's, the possessives in of and the several nonpossessive of constructions are themselves an underlying pattern of simultaneous likeness and difference. So is the illogical pattern present in the idea of burdens, the word "bear," and the word "bare." The line in which the first of these questions ends and the second begins is an epitome of the construction and action of the speech: "With a bare bodkin? Who would fardels bear,. . . ." The two precisely equal halves of a single rhythmic unit hold together two separate syntactical units. The beginning of the new sentence, "Who would fardels bear," echoes both the beginning, "For who would bear," and the sound of one word, "bare," from the end of the old. Moreover, "bare" and "bear," two words that are both the same and different, participate here in statements of the two undistinguishable alternatives: "to be, or not to be"—to bear fardels, or to kill oneself with a bare bodkin.

The end of the speech sounds like the rationally achieved conclusion of just such a rational investigation as Hamlet began. It begins with thus, the sign of logical conclusion, and it gains a sound of inevitable truth and triumphant clarity from the incremental repetition of and at the beginning of every other line. The last lines are relevant to Hamlet's behavior in the play at large and therefore have an additional sound of Tightness here. Not only are the lines broadly appropriate to the play, the audience's understanding of them is typical of its understanding throughout the play and of its understanding of the previous particulars of this speech: Hamlet has hesitated to kill Claudius. Consideration of suicide has seemed a symptom of that hesitancy. Here the particular from which Hamlet's conclusions about his inability to act derive is his hesitancy to commit suicide. The audience hears those conclusions in the context of his failure to take the action that suicide would avoid.
Thus conscience does make cowards of us all,
And thus the native hue of resolution
Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought,
And enterprises of great pitch and moment
With this regard their currents turn awry
And lose the name of action.

(III.i.83-88)

These last lines are accidentally a compendium of phrases descriptive of the action of the speech and the process of hearing it. The speech puzzles the will, but it makes us capable of facing and bearing puzzlement. The "To be or not to be" soliloquy is a type of the over-all action of Hamlet. In addition, a soliloquy in which being and its opposite are indistinguishable is peculiarly appropriate to a play otherwise full of easily distinguishable pairs that are not easily distinguished from one another by characters or audience or both: Rosencrantz and Guildenstern; the pictures of Gertrude's two husbands (III.iv.54-68); the hawk and the handsaw (II.ii.370); and father and mother who are one flesh and so undistinguished in Hamlet's farewell to Claudius (IV.iii.48-51). The soliloquy is above all typical of a play whose last moments enable its audience to look unblinking upon a situation in which Hamlet, the finally successful revenger, is the object of Laertes' revenge; a situation in which Laertes, Hamlet's victim, victimizes Hamlet; a situation in which Fortinbras, the threat to Denmark's future in scene one, is its hope for political salvation; in short, a situation in which any identity can be indistinguishable from its opposite. The soliloquy, the last scene, the first scene, the play—each and together—make an impossible coherence of truths that are both undeniably incompatible and undeniably coexistent.

IV

The kind of criticism I am doing here may be offensive to readers conditioned to think of revelation as the value of literature and the purpose of criticism. The things I have said about Hamlet may be made more easily palatable by the memory that illogical coherence—coherent madness—is a regular topic of various characters who listen to Hamlet and Ophelia. In the Reynaldo scene (II.i) and Hamlet's first talk with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern the power of rhetoric and context to make a particular either good or bad at will is also a topic in the play. So too is the perception of clouds which may in a moment look "like a camel indeed," and "like a weasel" and be "very like a whale" (III.ii.361-67).

What I am doing may seem antipoetical; it should not. On the contrary, the effects I have described in Hamlet are of the same general kind as the nonsignificant coherences made by rhythm, rhyme, alliteration, and others of the standard devices of prosody. For example, the physics of the relationship among Hamlet, Laertes, Fortinbras, and Pyrrhus, the four avenging sons in Hamlet, are in their own scale and substance the same as those of the relationship among cat, rat, bat, and chat. The theme of suicide, for all the inconstancy of its fluid moral and emotional value, is a constant and unifying factor in the play. So too is the theme of appearance and reality, deceit, pretense, disguise, acting, seeming, and cosmetics which gives the play coherence even though its values are as many as its guises and labels. The analogy of rhyme or of a pair of like-metered lines applies profitably to the nonsignifying relationship between Hamlet's two interviews with women. Both the nunnery scene with Ophelia and the closet scene with Gertrude are stage-managed and overlooked by Polonius; neither lady understands Hamlet; both are amazed by his intensity; in both scenes Hamlet makes a series of abortive departures before his final exit. There is a similar kind of insignificant likeness in numerous repeated patterns of scenes and situations like that of Hamlet's entrance reading in II.ii and its echo in Ophelia's show of devotional reading in III.i. Indeed, the same sort of thing can be said about any of the themes and images whose value critics have tried to convert to significance.
The tools of prosody and the phenomena I have talked about show their similarity well when they cooperate in Hamlet's little poem on perception and truth, a poem that is a model of the experience of the whole play. Polonius reads it to the king and queen:

Doubt thou the stars are fire;
Doubt that the sun doth move;
Doubt truth to be a liar;
But never doubt I love.

(II.ii.116-19)

I suggest that the pleasure of intellectual possession evoked by perception of the likeness and difference of "fire" and "liar" and of "move" and "love," or among the four metrically like and unlike lines, or between the three positive clauses and the one negative one, or between "stars" and "sun" or "truth" and "liar" is of the same kind as the greater achievement of intellectual mastery of the greater challenge presented by "doubt" in the first three lines. The first two doubts demand disbelief of two things that common sense cannot but believe. The third, whose likeness to the first two is insisted upon by anaphora, is made unlike them by the words that follow it: disbelief that truth is a liar is a logical necessity; therefore, "doubt" here must mean "believe" or "incline to believe" as it does earlier in this scene (1. 56) and several other times in the play. To be consistent with the pair of hyperbolic impossibilities to which it is coupled, and to fit the standard rhetorical formula (Doubt what cannot be doubted, but do not doubt . . . ) in which it appears, "Doubt truth to be a liar" must be understood in a way inconsistent with another pattern of the poem, the previously established meaning of "doubt." Even the first two lines, which seem to fit the hyperbolic formula so well, may make the poem additionally dizzying because their subject matter could remind a Renaissance listener (once disturbed by the reversal of the meaning of the third "doubt") of doubts cast upon common-sense impressions by still recent astronomical discoveries, notably that the diurnal motion of the sun is an illusion.

The urgent rhetorical coherence of the poem is like that of the play. As the multitude of inconsistent and overlapping systems of coherence in the poem allows its listener to hold the two contradictory meanings of "doubt" in colloid-like suspension and to experience both the actions "doubt" describes, so in the play at large an alliteration of subjects—a sort of rhythm of ideas whose substance may or may not inform the situation dramatized—gives shape and identity, nonphysical substance, to the play that contains the situation. Such a container allows Shakespeare to replace conclusion with inclusion; it provides a particular and temporary context that overcomes the intellectual terror ordinarily inherent in looking at an action in all the value systems it invades. Such a container provides a sense of order and limitation sufficient to replace the comforting boundaries of carefully isolated frames of reference; it makes its audience capable of contemplating more truth than the mind should be able to bear.

In summary I would say that the thing about Hamlet that has put Western man into a panic to explain it is not that the play is incoherent, but that it is coherent. There are plenty of incoherent plays; nobody ever looks at them twice. This one, because it obviously makes sense and because it just as obviously cannot be made sense of, threatens our inevitable working assumption that there are no "more things in earth" than can be understood in one philosophy. People see Hamlet and tolerate inconsistencies that it does not seem they could bear. Students of the play have explained that such people do not, in fact, find the play bearable at all. They therefore whittle the play down for us to the size of one of its terms, and deny the others. Truth is bigger than any one system for knowing it, and Hamlet is bigger than any of the frames of reference it inhabits. Hamlet allows us to comprehend—hold on to—all the contradictions it contains. Hamlet refusing to cradle its audience's mind in a closed generic framework, or otherwise limit the ideological context of its actions. In Hamlet the mind is cradled in nothing more than the fabric of the play. The superior strength and value of that fabric is in the sense it gives that it is unlimited in its range, and that its audience is not only sufficient to comprehend but is in the act of achieving total comprehension of all the perceptions to which its mind can
open. The source of the strength is in a rhetorical economy that allows the audience to perform both of the basic actions of the mind upon almost every conjunction of elements in the course of the play: it perceives strong likeness, and it perceives strong difference. Every intellectual conjunction is also a disjunction, and any two things that pull apart contain qualities that are simultaneously the means of uniting them.

Philip Edwards (essay date 1985)


[In the following excerpt, Edwards surveys important critical interpretations of Hamlet and offers his own critical review of the play's events, characters, and themes.]

The Play and the Critics

It is probably safe to say that in the world's literature no single work has been so extensively written about as *Hamlet Prince of Denmark*. There are numerous histories, summaries and analyses of this great body of criticism, or parts of it, and numerous anthologies give selections from it. . . . What follows here is not an attempt to provide, even in the most summary form, a history of *Hamlet* criticism. It is a personal graph, linking together some moments in the history of the interpretation of *Hamlet* which I find important. It provides a starting point for the critical essay which follows. . . .

The eighteenth century was not disposed to sentimentalise Hamlet. Dr Johnson (1765) spoke of the 'useless and wanton cruelty' of his treatment of Ophelia, and of the speech in the prayer scene, when Hamlet refrains from killing Claudius for fear he will go to heaven, he said it was 'too horrible to be read or to be uttered'. The reader or the audience has a right to expect the 'poetical justice' of the punishment of Claudius, but this expectation is thwarted by the death of Ophelia, and the death of Hamlet as the price of killing the king. Hamlet indeed is 'rather an instrument than an agent', and 'makes no attempt to punish' Claudius after he has confirmation of his guilt. Johnson's brief remarks convey his strong sense of Hamlet's failure (and the weakness seems to him as much the author's as the prince's). 'The apparition left the regions of the dead to little purpose' (NV 11, 145-6).

George Steevens (1778) was strongly and unfavourably impressed by Hamlet's violence and callousness; he said it was the more necessary 'to point out the immoral tendency of his character' 'because Hamlet seems to have been hitherto regarded as a hero not undeserving the pity of the audience' (NV 11, 147). But for Henry Mackenzie (1780) Hamlet was a man of exquisite sensibility and virtue 'placed in a situation in which even the amiable qualities of his mind serve but to aggravate his distress and to perplex his conduct'. Hamlet was not perfect, but from our compassion and anxiety concerning him arises that 'indescribable charm . . . which attracts every reader and every spectator' (NV 11, 148). This is very much the tone of Goethe's famous comments in *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* (1795-6; translated into English by Carlyle, 1812). *Hamlet* essentially is a story of the inadequacy and impotence of sensitivity in the face of the stern demands of action. An oak tree has been planted in a precious vase fitted to receive beautiful flowers; as the tree's roots spread out the vase is shattered in pieces. 'A beautiful, pure, noble, and most moral nature, without the strength of nerve which makes the hero, sinks beneath a burden which it can neither bear nor throw off; every duty is holy to him,—this too hard.' Much less often quoted are some later remarks which show how completely off the mark Rebecca West was in *The Court and the Castle* (1958, pp. 64-5) in supposing that Goethe was impatient with Hamlet for not saving himself by effort and action, and in associating Goethe with the 'pelagianism' of believing that the world offers its rewards to those who really try. Quite the reverse; Goethe says that poets and historians flatter us by pretending that man's proud lot may be the single-minded accomplishment of great purposes. 'In *Hamlet* we are taught otherwise.' Purgatory is shown to have no power to bring about what it wishes and nor has man. Inscrutable Fate has its way, toppling the bad with the good,
mowing down one race as the next springs up. Hamlet's impotence, therefore, is only an extreme form of a powerlessness general to mankind (NV 11, 273-4).

The impotence of Hamlet as understood by Coleridge (1808-12) is quite different. His Hamlet is not a man broken under the weight of too demanding an obligation, but a man incapable of acting. 'Shakespeare wished to impress upon us the truth, that action is the chief end of existence.' Hamlet knows perfectly well what he ought to do, and he is always promising to do it, but he is constitutionally averse to action, and his energy evaporates in self-reproach. The world of the mind was more real than the external world; his passion was for the indefinite. 'Hence great, enormous, intellectual activity, and a consequent proportionate aversion to real action.' Coleridge confessed that e a smack of Hamlet myself, if I may say so.1 The habit of identifying oneself with Hamlet, which is far from being as widespread as is sometimes supposed, is enshrined in the remark of Hazlitt (1817) that the speeches and sayings of Hamlet are 'as real as our own thoughts . . . It is we who are Hamlet' (NV 11, 155).

To return to Germany, where so much was contributed to the study of Hamlet, we reach a landmark with A. W. Schlegel's Lectures on Dramatic Art and Literature, delivered in 1808. Hamlet is a 'tragedy of thought' (Gedankentrauerspiel). This 'thought' is not Coleridge's habit-of-contemplation, inevitably inhibiting action, but a profound scepticism which questions the value of action. Here, powerfully, is Hamlet the doubter, and not the amiable dreamer: a restless sceptic of uncertain principles.

Hamlet has no firm belief either in himself or in anything else: from expressions of religious confidence he passes over to religious doubt . . . The stars themselves, from the course of events, afford no answer to the questions so urgently proposed to them. A voice, commissioned as it would appear by Heaven from another world, demands vengeance for a monstrous enormity, and the demand remains without effect. The criminals are at last punished, but, as it were, by an accidental blow . . . The less guilty or the innocent are equally involved in the general destruction.

(NV II, 279-80)

It was left for Herman Ulrici (1839) to focus Hamlet's doubts on an area which had attracted little discussion, the morality of revenge. Ulrici's work has been neglected because Bradley was so dismissive of the 'conscience theory'. 'Even though the King were trebly a fratricide,' wrote Ulrici, 'in a Christian sense it would still be a sin to put him to death with one's own hand, without a trial and without justice.' Of the Ghost he says, 'it cannot be a pure and heavenly spirit that wanders on earth to stimulate his son to avenge his murder'. In Hamlet, therefore, the Christian struggles with the natural man. It is his task to make the action imposed on him one that he can undertake freely and by conviction as a moral action. His 'regard for the eternal salvation of his soul . . . forces him to halt and consider'. However, he is betrayed less by his vindictive impulses than by his own creative energy in trying to 'shape at pleasure the general course of things'. He thus rejects the guiding hand of God, and his aspiration to be a kind of god himself is a sinful overestimate of human power. Here, I think for the first time, is the view that Hamlet errs in trying to act as Providence, a view which has been considerably developed in the twentieth century.2

Almost every writer and thinker of the later nineteenth century had his say about Hamlet. Friedrich Nietzsche in The Birth of Tragedy (1872) found that Hamlet 'speaks more superficially than he acts'; there is something deeper going on in the play than finds appropriate expression in the speeches. It is with Hamlet as with Greek tragedy—'the myth . . . never finds an adequate objective correlative in the spoken word'.3 At this level deeper than speech, Nietzsche saw Hamlet as an example of Dionysiac man who has pierced through the illusions by which we live and sustain ourselves and who, if forced back into 'quotidian reality', views it with detestation.
Dionysiac man might be said to resemble Hamlet; both have looked into the true nature of things; they have understood and are now loth to act. They realise that no action of theirs can work any change in the eternal condition of things, and they regard the imputation as ludicrous or debasing that they should set right the time which is now out of joint. Understanding kills action, for in order to act we require the veil of illusion; such is Hamlet's doctrine, not to be confounded with the cheap wisdom of John-a-Dreams, who through too much reflection, as it were a surplus of possibilities, never arrives at action.

(section 7; p. 51)

In this last sentence Nietzsche dismisses the Coleridgean contemplator. It is not reflection but understanding which debars action: 'the apprehension of truth and its terror'. 'The truth once seen, man is aware everywhere of the ghastly absurdity of existence, comprehends the symbolism of Ophelia's fate and the wisdom of the wood sprite Silenus: nausea invades him' (pp. 51-2). (Silenus thought it was better not to be born at all or, failing that, to die as soon as possible.) Hamlet is not fixed enough in his nature for Nietzsche's portrait to have general applicability, but, as I shall argue, Nietzsche's words are a profound comment on the 'To be or not to be' soliloquy.

The observations of Stéphane Mallarmé on Hamlet first became widely known from Joyce's use of them in Ulysses (1922). In 1886, Mallarmé wrote of the tentativeness of Hamlet as a person (le seigneur latent qui ne peut devenir), and of his failure to translate potentiality into achievement, as being the very stuff of drama, which primarily concerns itself with the quarrel between men's dreams and the calamities of fortune. Mallarmé stressed Hamlet's solitariness, as an alien wherever he appeared. This emphasis was resumed in some remarkable lines in an article 'Hamlet et Fortinbras' in La Revue blanche in 1896. 'He walks about, and the book he reads is himself (Il se promène . . . lisant au livre de lui-même). He denies others with his look. But it's not just the solitude of the contemplative man which is expressed. He is a killer. He kills without concern, and even if he does not do the killing—people die. 'The black presence of this doubter causes this poison.' (Il tue indifféremment ou, du moins, on meurt. La noire présence du douteur cause ce poison, que tous les personnages trépassent: sans même que lui prenne toujours la peine de les percer, dans la tapisserie.)

Mallarmé saw Hamlet by flashes, and the sinister figure whom he glimpsed seems as far removed as possible from the prince as he appears in A. C. Bradley's Shakespearean Tragedy of 1904. Bradley's masterly work on Hamlet was the most considered and extended examination which the play had up to that time received. It stands as a kind of pillar at the end of the nineteenth century, reviewing and assessing what had gone before, the last and greatest statement of a prevailing view of Hamlet (though the preceding review indicates that it had already been undermined). It is a view of Hamlet as a noble and generous youth who for reasons inexplicable to himself is unable to carry out a deed of punishment enjoined on him by divine authority. What causes this paralysis? It is not conscience, it is not the immorality of revenge, it is not the frailty of his nature nor the fatal habit of contemplation. Hamlet procrastinates, Bradley argues, because his true nature is blanketed by the melancholy ensuing from the death of his father and his mother's remarriage. It is this affliction which inhibits the fulfilment of his purposes and makes him seek any excuse for delay.

Bradley's book as a whole was dismissive of the religious element in Shakespearean tragedy and Elizabethan drama as a whole (it was 'almost wholly secular', p. 25), but he saw Hamlet as something of an exception.

While Hamlet certainly cannot be called in the specific sense a 'religious drama', there is in it nevertheless both a freer use of popular religious ideas, and a more decided, though always imaginative, intimation of a supreme power concerned in human evil and good, than can be found in any other of Shakespeare's tragedies.

(p. 174)
It is because of the sense of Providence in the play that 'the apparent failure of Hamlet's life is not the ultimate truth concerning him'. The figure of the Ghost is 'a reminder or a symbol of the connexion of the limited world of ordinary experience with the vaster life of which it is but a partial appearance'. He 'affects imagination' not only as 'the apparition of a dead king who desires the accomplishment of his purposes' but as 'the messenger of divine justice'.

A, C. Bradley, like Edward Dowden (who contributed a notable edition of Hamlet to the old Arden series in 1899), was a professor in one of the departments of English Literature which were being created in universities new and old throughout the English-speaking world towards the end of the nineteenth century. The number of studies of Hamlet increased enormously as the academic study of English literature burgeoned. A great deal of attention was now given to the difficult problem of the text of the play; to its sources, to the relationship of the play with its predecessor; to its date; to the status of the first quarto; to the theatrical conventions of the revenge play; to theatre conditions and audience response; to contemporary history; to contemporary thinking about spirits, second marriages, melancholy, incest, elective monarchies, purgatory and punctuation. Yet it has to be said that with some notable exceptions like Bradley the academics have not always been the leaders of opinion on Hamlet, and the understanding of the play owes as much to writers and thinkers who were not professional scholars as to the scholars themselves. A good example of this is the influence of Freud, whose mere footnote on Hamlet's Oedipus complex in The Interpretation of Dreams in 1900 has had gigantic influence. Ernest Jones built on this in 1910 for the first of his several psychoanalytic studies of Hamlet, arguing that Hamlet's problems were caused by his unconscious wish to supplant his father and lie with his mother. Psychoanalytic explanations of Hamlet's delay lurk behind T. S. Eliot's lofty and capricious essay of 1919. 'The play is most certainly an artistic failure', because Shakespeare was unable to transform the intractable material he inherited from the old play and the sources into a vehicle or 'objective correlative' capable of conveying the issues and emotions which it strives to express. 'Nothing that Shakespeare can do with the plot can express Hamlet for him.' Hamlet's emotions are 'in excess of the facts as they appear'. Shakespeare's failure lay in trying to convert a father-and-son play about revenge into a mother-and-son play about—something else. The reason he couldn't get it into shape was the extent of his own hang-ups. 'Hamlet, like the sonnets, is full of some stuff that the writer could not drag to light, contemplate, or manipulate into art.'

Eliot was a greater poet than John Masefield, but the essay on Hamlet which Masefield wrote as an introduction to the play in 1911 is more interesting and valuable than Eliot's better-known pages. Masefield saw Hamlet as the embodiment of a very special human wisdom caught between two opposing forces which were trying to complete themselves. The one force is seen in a murderous take-over of the kingdom; the other in a cry for revenge. A bloody purpose from outside life matches a bloody purpose within. Life has been wrenched from its course and an attempt has to be made to wrench it back, or it is to be allowed to continue on its new course. Hamlet's wisdom baffles both alternatives. The Ghost, representing 'something from outside life trying to get into life', presents Hamlet with a simple task—'All tasks are simple to the simple-minded.' The translation of this act into practical terms is 'a defilement' which it is 'difficult for a wise mind to justify'. But if Hamlet in a sense defeats both the principles which are presented to him, he is himself defeated by life. 'She destroys the man who wrenched her from her course, and the man who would neither wrench her back nor let her stay.'

There is something in Masefield of Ulrici's theory that Hamlet could not take revenge unless he were able to metamorphose the barbaric act by coming to it with a voluntary inward motivation and equate it with Christian moral law. Masefield stressed the superiority of Hamlet's ethical principles to those of the Ghost, and the defilement that Hamlet is in danger of by an incautious obedience. This looks not only back to Ulrici but forward to what one might call the 'contamination theory' much in evidence in the mid twentieth century. This holds that Hamlet's chief perplexity is one of translation: of finding a way to convert the Ghost's injunction into action without being stained by the corruption of Denmark or becoming like the murderer whom he is to punish. Versions of this view can be found, for example, in Maynard Mack's well-known essay,
One of the most striking and important contributions during the first half of the twentieth century was George Wilson Knight's essay, 'The Embassy of Death' in The Wheel of Fire (1930). Although few people have expressed agreement with it, and though the author later retreated and modified his position, the essay swiftly and silently infused itself into the consciousness of literary criticism. Knight refused to accept Hamlet's jaundiced view of the Danish court. Denmark is a healthy and contented community with Claudius as its efficient and kindly administrator, sensibly not wishing to let memories of the past impede the promise of the future. By contrast, Hamlet is a figure of nihilism and death. He has been poisoned by his grief, and he has communed with the dead. He has been instructed never to let the past be forgotten. He is 'a sick soul . . . commanded to heal' and is in fact a poison in the veins of the community, 'an element of evil in the state of Denmark'. Knight strongly stressed Hamlet's apartness: 'inhuman—or superhuman . . . a creature of another world'. Neither side can understand the other. Claudius is a murderer and Hamlet of course has right on his side. But which of the two, he asked, 'is the embodiment of spiritual good, which of evil? The question of the relative morality of Hamlet and Claudius reflects the ultimate problem of this play.'

A balanced judgement [he continued] is forced to pronounce ultimately in favour of life as contrasted with death, for optimism and the healthily secondrate, rather than the nihilism of the superman: for he is not, as the plot shows, safe; and he is not safe, primarily because he is right.

(p. 40)

Prompt vengeance might have saved the day, but, in view of the disasters that Hamlet brings about, Knight's judgement was that 'Had Hamlet forgotten both the Ghost's commands [to remember the past and avenge the dead], it would have been well, since Claudius is a good king, and the Ghost but a minor spirit.' Claudius a good king, and the Ghost but a minor spirit—this is a deeply significant opposition for later criticism to digest. Having quoted Hamlet's words, 'The spirit that I have seen / May be the devil . . . ', Knight added 'It was.' Or at least, 'The Ghost may or may not have been a "goblin damned"; it certainly was no "spirit of health".'

Knight's essay seems to me brilliant and wrong. I have treated it at some length because a mass of criticism of the fifty years following can in some ways be considered as footnotes and codicils to it. Moreover, in setting up an opposition of an alienated, inhuman prophet and a smoothly running, kindly society, and opting for the latter, the essay vividly shows the alteration of the play's tragic balance which is so striking a feature of contemporary criticism. Although for a long time the orthodox interpretation of Hamlet as taught in schools and universities (in Britain at any rate) remained predominantly Bradleyan, it becomes harder to find critics who to any extent believe in Hamlet and his mission. Extreme forms of distaste for the hero are to be seen in Salvador de Madariaga's On Hamlet (1948) and L. C. Knights's An Approach to Hamlet (1960). Madariaga stressed Hamlet's cruelty, egocentricity and aristocratic disdain. Knights stressed Hamlet's immaturity and his lack of 'a ready responsiveness to life'.

Wilson Knight's essay presented the identity and the authority of the Ghost as a major point of debate. What the Elizabethans were likely to think on this matter became a primary issue for scholarship. John Dover Wilson, whose pioneering and indispensable research into the text of Hamlet had been published in 1934, included in his What Happens in 'Hamlet' of 1935 an early study of Elizabethan attitudes to ghosts. His
conclusion that there were three degrees of scepticism, with Catholics being less sceptical than Protestants, has proved too much of a simplification. Later research is reviewed, and the investigation carried further, in Eleanor Prosser's *Hamlet and Revenge* (1967). It is impossible to ignore, in considering *Hamlet*, the deep caution and scepticism with which Shakespeare's contemporaries, whether Catholic or Protestant, viewed ghosts and reports of ghosts. They might be hallucinations, or angels, or demons out to ensnare one's soul. That a ghost might be the soul of a dead person revisiting earth was a very remote possibility. Hamlet's early affirmation of the Ghost's genuineness has come to look more questionable than his later doubts, and the confidence of generations of critics, and hence of schoolchildren, that Hamlet's profession of scepticism in 2.2, with his plan to test the Ghost, is mere procrastination now seems insecurely founded. Not many would go as far as Eleanor Prosser in holding that the Ghost was a demon. But one of the important achievements of modern scholarship is to have unsettled the Ghost and made it impossible to accept his credentials and authority as a matter of course and without question. The ambiguity of the Ghost is not just Hamlet's problem. Much is to be built on Nigel Alexander's perception that Shakespeare's guardedness about the Ghost is an essential feature of the play: 'the nature of the Ghost is intended to be an open question'.

Associated with the issue of the origin of the Ghost is the question of the morality of what he enjoins on Hamlet, revenge for murder. As we have seen, this question has been asked for a long time, since Ulrici at least. Scholarship has concerned itself for many years with what would have been the Elizabethan answer to the question. Massive evidence has been assembled that private vengeance was abhorrent to Elizabethans as anti-Christian and anti-social—and also that the Elizabethans were a pretty vindictive lot. Once again, Eleanor Prosser's book can be cited for its review of the debate. And once again her own position is at the extreme edge of the spectrum, namely that the *donnée* of the play is the conviction that revenge was evil in the extreme. It is best not to be too keen on certainties in this matter. The Elizabethan revenge-play, and *Hamlet* in particular, is concerned with exploration, not preaching. It devotes itself to the whole issue of the legitimacy of violence and the responsibility of the individual in pursuing justice, finding in the revenge convention an extraordinarily rich source of conflicts to exhibit and illuminate the many faces of violence and redress. To prejudge the plays by saying that for the Elizabethans revenge was of course evil or was of course acceptable is to defeat them completely—as completely as does the superior view that the whole revenge convention is barbarous and silly. Some of the best pages of the mid century on *Hamlet* arose from a sharp reaction against simplistic conclusions about Elizabethan attitudes to revenge. In *The Business of Criticism*, 1959, Helen Gardner wrote excellently of the division of mind that must exist for every thinking person in every age who tries to achieve justice without outrage to conscience.

I conclude this 'personal graph' of criticism with a look at the very small group of twentieth-century critics who have seen *Hamlet* as a religious play. Middleton Murry (Shakespeare, 1936) believed that Hamlet's fear of damnation was an immensely important factor in the play, overlooked by us because we provide Shakespeare's tragic heroes 'with every modern convenience' including our indifference to an after-life. E. M. W. Tillyard (Shakespeare's Problem Plays, 1950) wrote: 'In *Hamlet* if anywhere in Shakespeare we notice the genealogy from the Miracle Plays with their setting of Heaven, Purgatory, and Hell . . . *Hamlet* is one of the most medieval as well as one of the most acutely modern of Shakespeare's plays' (p. 30). C. S. Lewis's British Academy Shakespeare Lecture of 1942, 'Hamlet: the prince or the poem?', was a curiously directed piece with a lot of shadow-boxing which seems quite unnecessary for the main argument. The particularity of Hamlet as a character was for him as unimportant as the particularity of revenge. Hamlet is 'not "a man who has to avenge his father" but "a man who has been given a task by a ghost"'. The appearance of the Ghost 'means a breaking down of the walls of the world'. Chaos supervenes: 'doubt, uncertainty, bewilderment to almost any degree is what the ghost creates'. Hamlet goes through a spiritual region, traversed by most of us. Hamlet's phrase, 'such fellows as 1.124) 'means men'—'and the vast empty vision of them "crawling between earth and heaven" is what really counts and really carries the burden of the play'. 'Its true hero is man—haunted man—man with his mind on the frontier of two worlds, man unable either quite to reject or quite to admit the supernatural.'
The Action of the Play

The Platform

*Hamlet* opens with soldiers on guard at night in a scene full of perturbation and anxiety. It is nervousness about the apparition which predominates, of course, 'this thing', 'this dreaded sight', looking exactly like the late king in full armour. It is an ominous thing, and the sceptic Horatio, who is quickly converted, fears that it 'bodes some strange eruption to our state'. The state is already in turmoil, being hastily put on a war footing. Fortinbras of Norway is threatening to invade Denmark to recover lands which his father lost to the late King Hamlet a generation ago. Recollection of that old combat coming on top of the apparition focuses all attention on the dead king. The practice of calling the king by the name of his country enforces an identity between king and kingdom, the health of the one reflecting the health of the other, so that the old king's death seems to mark the end of an era. 'The king that's dead' is referred to as 'the majesty of buried Denmark'. Much later, the first words of the mad Ophelia are 'Where is the beauteous majesty of Denmark?' Even a routine cry like Bernardo's 'Long live the king!' in the third line of the play takes an additional meaning as we sense the apprehension of the watch for what may be the consequences for Denmark of the loss of their hero-king.

*Hamlet* is about Denmark as well as its prince. How Denmark fares as a society is in our minds all the time. But of course it's not just Hamlet and Denmark. Though Hamlet is at the centre of the play, he exists in his relationships, familial, social, sexual, political, divine; and even Hamlet, the most famous 'individual' in drama, is not so exclusively the centre that he diminishes the importance of what he is related to: family, society, God.

Since it is his threat to the kingdom which is the cause of the watch being set, young Fortinbras may be said to start the play off. In fact he encircles it, seeing that he enters at the very end to take over the kingdom without having to fight for it. Having so satisfactorily concluded his business, he will be able to give his 'landless resolutes' whatever they would like to have. Fortinbras succeeds where Hamlet fails, though Hamlet has been trying to right a great wrong and Fortinbras has been interested only in reversing the lawful outcome of his father's reckless challenge.

'I know not seems'

Prince Hamlet in black carries into the court (in 1.2) that memory of the dead king which Claudius and Gertrude are anxious to erase. His grief, he says, is real not assumed, unlike (he implies) the emotions being expressed around him. But the most determined candour could scarcely reveal in public what he pours out when he is alone: his feeling of total despair, of *taedium vitae*, of the weary meaninglessness of 'all the uses of this world'. He has no wish to continue living, but divine law forbids suicide. Why is all this? Because his father has suddenly died and his mother has speedily taken a new husband. Too slight a ground for despair? Hamlet's protestations are extreme. To call Claudius a satyr—a lecherous goat-like creature—does not make much sense to an audience who has just seen the new king efficiently managing his courtiers and the affairs of the nation. His mother's remarriage makes him call in question the constancy of all women. 'Hyperion to a satyr!' 'Frailty, thy name is woman!' Such passionate attachment to his father, such contempt for his uncle, such disgust with his mother, may seem pathological, what Eliot would call 'in excess of the facts'. Hamlet's indignation does indeed go deeper than the 'facts' but its source is not morbid.

The story of Cain and Abel is brought into the play during this scene (105) and appears again twice (3.3.38 and 5.1.65).¹ That first murder shattered the human family; it resulted from and betokened man's falling away from God. The identification of Claudius with Cain—which he himself makes—gives us the context in which we should put the 'unreasonable' bitterness of Hamlet, though as yet he knows nothing about any murder. In his book *Violence and the Sacred*, René Girard argued that cultural breakdown in early society, what he terms the 'sacrificial crisis', involves the failure to recognise acknowledged distinctions and differences. The erasure
of difference shows itself in myth in the mortal rivalry of two brothers for what cannot be shared, a throne, a woman. Girard quotes the 'degree' speech in Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida* as an inspired perception of the chaos and violence which flow from the weakening of accepted distinctions. If, instead of the reading 'each thing meets in mere oppugnancy', he had followed the quarto text with 'each thing *melts* in mere oppugnancy', he would have shown how even more forcefully the passage conveys the rooted fear of the loss of category, of identity, of distinctiveness.

The obliteration of distinction, before Hamlet knows anything about fratricide or adultery, lies in Claudius taking his brother's place as king and husband and in Gertrude tranquilly accepting him as substitute. Their acts may offend against taste and ethics but the deeper offence is the undermining of an ideal of the person enshrined in antiquity and law. Hamlet's expressions, 'Hyperion to a satyr' and 'no more like my father / Than I to Hercules', show a mythographic ordering of the human differences. So in the closet scene Hamlet tries to force the distinction of the two men on to his mother by means of the two pictures. 'Have you eyes?' he shouts at her—

See what a grace was seated on this brow;
Hyperion's curls, the front of Jove himself,
An eye like Mars, to threaten and command;
A station like the herald Mercury . . .

(3.4.55-8)

This matter of the blurring of distinctions in a man claiming to be his brother helps to explain Hamlet's passion against Claudius as a usurper—

A slave that is not twentieth part the tithe
Of your precedent lord, a vice of kings,
A cutpurse of the empire and the rule . . .

(3.4.97-9)

Denmark is an elective monarchy as Hamlet knows quite well (see 1.2.109, 5.2.65, 335). But Shakespeare plays off this elective monarchy against his Elizabethan audience's deep emotional commitment to primogeniture and the right of a son to inherit. The Danish system condemns itself; a country which chooses its kings ends up with the rabble-cry of 'Choose we! Laertes shall be king!' (4.5.106). It has chosen for its king one who, did they but know, organised the vacancy by murder. For the audience, the system is a legalism which runs counter to their instinctive sense of Tightness. There is a higher court than the court of Denmark, and in that court Hamlet is the dispossessed prince. Hamlet himself is both a Dane and an Elizabethan; whatever Danish law says, Claudius has usurped his brother, and violently appropriated a kingship he has no right to.

Gertrude's offence in confusing the two brothers is much deepened in the audience's eyes later in the first act when they learn that she committed adultery with Claudius while her husband was alive. (There is no mistaking the plain sense of the Ghost's words; 1.5.46.) The willingness of this complaisant woman to sleep with either of two brothers is a forceful image of the failure of discrimination which is central to the tragedy of *Hamlet*.

In this second scene Hamlet is unaware of adultery or murder. But he has repudiated with contempt the appropriation of that vital distinction of fatherhood which Claudius grandly tries to add to his other appropriations. 'But now my cousin Hamlet, and my son . . . ' Hamlet will not accept the relationship; it is 'more than kin'. He knows he is not Claudius's son, and the same knowledge tells him that Claudius is not
Gertrude's husband, nor Denmark's king. It is this knowledge, as well as grief for a father's death and the shallowness of a mother's love, which makes the whole world an unweeded garden.

**The Ghost**

Hamlet is galvanised into activity by the news of the appearance of a ghost that resembles his dead father. On the platform that night he sees it and is determined to speak to it whatever happens. It is explanation he wants; explanation and a course of action. 'Let me not burst in ignorance', he cries. 'What should we do?' Though it is specific explanation—why the Ghost has come—and a specific course of action—what the Ghost wants him to do—that he seeks, his words have a wider perspective. The Ghost may have some secret, some unimaginable truth to bring relief from those 'thoughts beyond the reaches of our souls', an explanation why things are as they are and a directive for meaningful action. To his demands in both their specific and their general senses he receives, or thinks he receives, a more than sufficient response.

The Ghost declares that he is his father's spirit, gives him the extraordinary tidings of murder and adultery, and asks him to take revenge. His injunctions are summed up in the three imperatives, 'Bear it not', 'Taint not thy mind', 'Leave her to heaven.' These interconnect. 'Bear it not' looks both backwards and forwards. The idea of retribution is implied by the Ghost's appeal to Hamlet's 'nature', that is, his filial piety. 'Bear it not' means that as a son he is not to acquiesce in and accept what has been done to his father. But it looks also to the future. The abuse of Denmark by the very continuation of this pair in sovereignty and in marriage is not to be endured: 'Bear it not.' The second imperative is very strange: 'howsomever thou pursues this act, / Taint not thy mind'. Whatever the exact meaning of 'taint' . . . the tone of the remark is that the Ghost does not consider this matter of revenge too difficult an act, and is anxious that Hamlet should not become too disturbed about it. No doubt for the Ghost the challenge is like that which he accepted all those years ago when he agreed to face old Fortinbras in a single combat: a matter of honour, determination, courage and skill. The final injunction, 'Leave her to heaven', must temper our feeling of the Ghost's personal vindictiveness. It is more important, however, in giving a religious context to the punishment of Claudius and Gertrude. Gertrude's earthly punishment is to be her conscience: 'those thorns that in her bosom lodge / To prick and sting her'. Whatever further punishment or exoneration is hers to receive belongs to an after-life. With Claudius it is different. By his words 'Leave her to heaven', the Ghost must imply that a higher justice requires the exemplary punishment of Claudius on earth, by the hand of an appointed human being. The Ghost's commands indicate not the pursuit of personal satisfaction but the existence of a world beyond the human world responsible for justice in the human world. Whether the Ghost has the authority to convey this the play never makes clear.

Awful though it is, Hamlet now has his explanation. What had seemed the degeneration of the world turns out to be a condition which is clearly and starkly the consequence of a double crime. He now also has his directive, a commission that is also a mission. His reaction to the Ghost is like a religious conversion. He wipes away all previous knowledge, all previous values, and baptises himself as a new man (1.5.95-104).

The commandment is summed up by the Ghost as 'Remember!' 'Remember me', says the Ghost, and Hamlet repeats the word three times in his dedication. The Ghost is to be remembered 'whiles memory holds a seat / In this distracted globe', that is to say so long as this now-disordered world attributes any value to the past and its traditions, to the established standards of virtue and justice. . . . In this speech, to remember means more than to keep in mind; it means to maintain and to restore. In the section 'Of Redemption' in *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, Nietzsche deplored those who could not accept the 'It was' of time. He saw vengeance and punishment as an imprisonment of the will in concentrating on the past in an effort to undo what could not be
 undone. 'This, yea, this is very vengeance!—Will's abhorrence of time and its "It was". It is quite clear that Hamlet is not prepared to accept the 'It was' of time, and that he regards revenge as a task of creative remembrance, that is, the restoration of a society that has fallen to pieces. The act ends with

The time is out of joint: O cursed spite,
That ever I was born to set it right.

This is a terrible moment as, all exhilaration gone, he faces the burden of his responsibilities. But who has told him that it is his responsibility to put the world to rights? to restore the disjointed frame of things to its true shape? No one but himself. It is the entirely self-imposed burden of cleansing the world that he now groans under.

The Antic Disposition

'As a stranger give it welcome', says Hamlet to Horatio about the supernatural visitation.

There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio,
Than are dreamt of in your philosophy.

He identifies himself with the world of the stranger, and shows his alienation from Denmark and its values by adopting the garb of madness. The 'antic disposition' (an essential element in the old Amleth story) puzzles and worries the man who is now his enemy and sworn victim; it also has symbolic significance in denoting that Hamlet, like Bunyan's Christian, having received his call, considers himself a pilgrim and a stranger in his own city of Vanity Fair. Madness is conduct which does not conform to society's standards. Very well, says Hamlet, I am a madman.

Shakespeare carefully marks a considerable lapse of time between Acts 1 and 2. . . . The first event in Hamlet's mission that we hear about is his silent ritual of divorce from Ophelia. Ophelia's tragedy, like Hamlet's, is the tragedy of obedience to a father. Only she really goes mad. And then—always going one step further than the prince—she doesn't stop at thinking about ending her life. At this stage in the play, she has obeyed her father and refused to see Hamlet. She now tells Polonius of the very peculiar encounter she has had with him. Hamlet, in a set piece of antic theatre, went dishevelled to her room and in total silence carried out what we might interpret as a ceremony of questioning, denunciation and separation. By this, he cuts the closest tie that binds him to the court of Denmark, and takes his school-fellow Horatio as his only confidant.

What are the values of 'Denmark' as we are shown them? The court party, Claudius, Polonius, Laertes, are much given to expressing their beliefs in resonant platitudes. Claudius knows the proper response to death, Laertes to sex, Polonius to everything. With each person, we see the insufficiency of their moralising. What Claudius is hiding we learn in 1.5 (though it is not confirmed until 3.1.50), and he is hiding it even from his new wife, who in turn tried to hide her double-life from her husband. Laertes is suspected by both his sister and his father of an inclination towards the primrose path of dalliance. Polonius advocates reticence, truth and straightdealing, but is loquacious and devious. It is the ever-ready platitudes, betrayed both by their rhetoric and by the conduct of those who utter them, that Hamlet discards as mere 'saws of books' as he enters his new life. It is interesting that the heavy moralising of the court party accompanies a low view of human nature. Polonius and Laertes both expect Hamlet to be the insouciant seducer that is their stereotype of an aristocrat. (Hamlet, on the other hand, is an 'idealist', expecting mothers to be above sexual desire.) Polonius's proclivity for spying—which leads to his own violent death—is shown in the grotesque commission to Reynaldo to keep an eye on Laertes in Paris and then in his schemes to find out what's wrong with Hamlet. Claudius has much greater need than Polonius to find out what lies behind Hamlet's strange behaviour; his elaborate plot to use Rosencrantz and Guildenstern as decoys is quickly uncovered by Hamlet.
What Hamlet is really thinking about during the long scene 2.2 is impossible to say. Everything he says to Polonius, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern has its irony, and if his hearers do not know when he is being sane and serious, nor do we. When he tells Rosencrantz and Guildenstern that he is 'most dreadfully attended.' (255) he is not really talking about his servants. He may have the Ghost in mind, but chiefly he must mean his own thoughts. We are sure enough of him when he says he finds Denmark a prison. And with that extraordinary end to his joke about Polonius taking his leave—'except my life, except my life, except my life'—we must feel the warning note that the taedium vitae which lifted from him when the Ghost spoke is descending again and that the ultimate dilemma of 'To be or not to be' is at hand.

What we should discount as an index of Hamlet's feelings is the famous speech 'What a piece of work is a man' (286-91). So often pointed to as a brilliant perception of the anguish of Renaissance man in general and of Hamlet in particular, it is a glorious blind, a flight of rhetoric by which a divided and distressed soul conceals the true nature of his distress and substitutes a formal and conventional state of Weltenschmerz. At the end of it he punctures the rhetoric himself.

Rogue and Peasant Slave

We are often reminded that Pyrrhus is, with Hamlet, Laertes and Fortinbras, another son avenging the slaying of his father (Achilles). But Hamlet swings into the rant of his second soliloquy not in any desire to emulate the cruel fury of Pyrrhus but out of shame that an actor's emotion for Pyrrhus's victim, Hecuba, should outdo his own emotion for Claudius's victim, his father. He has done nothing—it is true enough. But the effect of the eloquence of the old play and the actor's moving performance is to make him confuse doing with exhibition. His outburst is violent but essentially comic. His guilt runs away with him. Feeling that if he were a proper avenger he would exhibit a huge amount of passion he lets go a mammoth display of self-accusation and rage, culminating in a great stage-cry, geance!

With this, he becomes ashamed of his hysterical attitudinising and rebukes himself for unpacking his heart with words. He turns from rant to action. What has to be done? The idea of using the players to test the Ghost's veracity was in his mind before he fell 'acursing like a very drab' (see 2.2.493-5). Hamlet had approached the Ghost knowing it might be either a demon from hell or a spirit from heaven. Perhaps he accepted it as an 'honest ghost' with too little question. That he should test the Ghost's account before he proceeds to take the king's life is the most obvious precaution. He says all that needs to be said on this subject (551-5). The Ghost could be a spirit from hell taking advantage of his distress to lure him into an act that will damn his soul.

That Hamlet in deciding to use the test of a play is guilty of procrastination is scarcely tenable. . . . Procrastination means putting off until tomorrow what you know ought to be done today. Hamlet is indeed a tragedy of delay, but procrastination is only one special form of delay. At least part of the reason for his delay so far must be Hamlet's fear that he is being deluded by the devil into imperilling the life of Claudius and the fate of his own soul.

'To be or not to be'

Act 3 begins next day, the day that the court play is to be given. But even if we are aware of this lapse of time since Hamlet decided to use a play to test the king, it is a shock to us to find Hamlet speaking as he does, for the 'To be or not to be' soliloquy throws everything back into debate.

What is the question, 'to be or not to be'? All sorts of answers have been given. I can't doubt that Hamlet is asking whether one should go on living or whether one should take one's life. He is back in the depression of the first soliloquy, longing for the oblivion of death. But now the question whether life is worthwhile has much more knowledge and experience to take account of and brood over, and it assumes an entirely new
significance. It is extraordinary that, at this moment in the play, the soliloquy should seem so indifferent to the immediate problem of killing the king. Implicitly the issue is there all the time, but never explicitly. The reason for that is that killing the king has become part of a much wider debate.

To be or not to be, that is the question—
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. To die, to sleep—
No more; and by a sleep to say we end
The heart-ache and the thousand natural shocks
That flesh is heir to—'tis a consummation
Devoutly to be wished.

The question is which of two courses is the nobler. The first alternative is 'to be', to go on living, and this is a matter of endurance, of contriving to accept the continuous punishing hostility of life. The second alternative is 'not to be', to take one's life, and this is described as ending a sea of troubles by taking arms against it. There is only the one opposition to be made against the sea of troubles (which is the definition of our life) and that is the constructive act of suicide. Suicide is the one way in which fighting against the ungovernable tide—that mythical symbol of hopeless endeavour—can succeed.

If we accept that Hamlet's alternative in these opening lines is the course of enduring or the course of evading life's onslaught, there is an important consequence. The life that has to be suffered or evaded is described as a continuous, permanent condition of misfortune, and must therefore include the state of the world even after vengeance has been taken and Claudius killed—supposing that to happen. The whips and scorns of time, the oppressor's wrong—there is no indication that these can ever disappear from the world, except by disappearing from the world oneself. By his stark alternative in these opening lines Hamlet implicitly rejects the possibility that any act of his could improve the condition of the world or the condition of its victims. Revenge is of no avail. Whether Hamlet kills the king or not, Denmark will continue to be a prison, a place of suffering ruled by fortune. The only nobleness which is available if one goes on living is not the cleansing of the world by some great holy deed, but endurance, suffering in the mind.

But, as the soliloquy proceeds, the one positive act available to man, suicide, has to be ruled out. The sleep of death becomes a nightmare, because of the dread of damnation. What began as a question which was more noble ends as a contest in cowardliness. What is one the more afraid of, the possibility of damnation or the certainty of suffering on earth?

And so we do nothing, frightened to take the one route out of our misery. 'Thus conscience doth make cowards of us all.' 'Conscience' means what it normally means, what it means when Claudius uses it just before this (50) and when Hamlet uses it in the previous scene (2.2.558); that is to say, it has its religious meaning of an implanted sense of right and wrong. It is with this reflection that Hamlet moves away from suicide; it is with this 'regard'—this examination of the consequences of things and worrying about how they look in the eye of eternity—that other 'enterprises of great pitch and moment' lose the name of action. Hamlet must be thinking about killing Claudius. So, although only by inference and indirectly, Hamlet twice refers to his revenge in this soliloquy. On the first occasion we gather that he no longer has any faith that killing the king would be a cleansing act setting the world to rights; on the second, we gather that his resolution to exact revenge has been 'sicklied o'er' by respects of conscience. His conscience cannot convince him that the act is good; and, whether good or bad, it cannot change the world. We are condemned to unhappiness and to inactivity. Although this speech represents a trough of despair into which we don't see Hamlet fall again, the whole of the rest of the play is coloured by the extreme pessimism of this soliloquy.
It certainly affects his behaviour to Ophelia in the painful, cruel interview which now follows. All he says is backed by a loathing of the world, a loathing of himself, and a loathing of sex. It is hard for Ophelia that she should be in his way just at this moment, to trigger off an eruption of anger and disgust. At the same time, we realise that Hamlet sees his victim as life's victim. Her innocence cannot survive; she is unavoidably subject to the contagion of living; she will be corrupted by men as inevitably as, being a woman, she will corrupt them. When he says she should go to a nunnery, he means a nunnery. Only if she is locked up in perpetual virginity can she be saved. And there will be no more marriage. Hamlet begins to work at a new way of saving mankind—sexual abstinence.

Although I believe that Hamlet is primarily a religious play, and that Hamlet perpetually sees himself in a relationship with heaven and hell, yet it is noticeable that Hamlet voices very few really Christian sentiments—as contrasted with both Claudius and Ophelia. Only once, and then in his usual ironic manner, does he talk of praying (1.5.132). It is in this scene of cruelty to Ophelia, if anywhere, that behind the restless, unending teasing and taunting we might feel Hamlet's strong sense of his personal unworthiness and need of assistance. 'What should such fellows as I do crawling between earth and heaven?'

Play, Prayer, Murder

Hamlet is not content to let his 'mousetrap' play on the murder of Gonzago take its toll of Claudius's conscience without assistance. He forces its significance at Claudius as he later forces the poisoned cup at him (3.2.237-9). His insistent commentary gives Claudius the opportunity to cover his departure with righteous indignation against his nephew's impossible behaviour. At any rate, Hamlet has achieved his purpose. He is convinced of Claudius's guilt and he has made Claudius know that he knows. Hamlet does not lack courage. But what to do with this knowledge now? There is no way of avoiding the fact that at this critical juncture, with the Ghost's story confirmed, he chooses to do precisely what the Ghost forbade, take action against his mother.

First there is the difficult problem of how to take his extraordinary speech about drinking hot blood.

\begin{quote}
Tis now the very witching time of night,
When churchyards yawn, and hell itself breathes out
Contagion to this world. Now could I drink hot blood,
And do such bitter business as the day
Would quake to look on. Soft, now to my mother.
O heart, lose not thy nature . . .
\end{quote}

(3.2.349-54)

Some say that this speech is a sign that Hamlet has committed himself to hell; some say that he is rather awkwardly trying out the traditional role of the avenger of fiction. There is a grain of truth in both these theories, but neither can of itself explain the speech. We have just seen Hamlet, who has been at a peak of emotional intensity during and immediately after the play scene, in a keen and fierce verbal attack on Rosencrantz, Guildenstern and Polonius. That he should at this point in all seriousness bellow out like some Herod of the stage 'Now could I drink hot blood' is to me incredible. The rant of the 'rogue and peasant slave' soliloquy, induced by the emotion of the Pyrrhus speech, was understandable, but this seems quite out of keeping with character and situation. But that Hamlet should fear his declension into hellish activity, should fear himself slipping into the role of the stage-avenger, I could well imagine. The contagion of hell is what he wishes to avoid, and the last thing he wants to do is 'drink hot blood'. He says the words with a shiver of apprehension and disgust. Then, 'Soft, now to my mother.' As so often in this play, 'soft!' is a word of warning to oneself to turn away from some undesirable train of thought and attend to an immediate problem. . . . rt, lose not thy nature.' He really does fear he may do something terrible.
Action is now hedged about with all sorts of warnings and limitations concerning the good it can do to the
world or the harm it can do to him. But there is one task of primary urgency, whatever the Ghost said: to
shame and reclaim his mother. On the way to see her, he comes across Claudius at prayer. He goes over to kill
him, then pauses as he had paused over suicide, to reflect on the consequences. Again it is the after-life that is
uppermost in his mind, but the fear about damnation now is that Claudius may not be damned. He wants
Claudius damned, and he is not prepared to take the risk that if he kills him while he is praying he will go to
heaven. He will wait for an opportunity that will make revenge more complete and damnation more certain.

Then trip him that his heels may kick at heaven,
And that his soul may be as damned and black
As hell whereto it goes.

(3.3.93-5)

Savagery of this order is familiar to students of Elizabethan revenge fiction. Perhaps the contagion of hell
has touched Hamlet. But, repellent though it is that Hamlet so passionately wants the eternal perdition of his
victim, it is perhaps more striking that he should think that it is in his power to control the fate of Claudius's
soul. It is surely a monstrously inflated conception of his authority that is governing him, distorting still
further the scope of the Ghost's injunctions. In this scene the arrogance of the man who is trying to effect
justice is strongly contrasted with the Christian humility of the man who has done murder.

Hamlet means what he says in the prayer scene. The procrastination theory held that once again Hamlet was
finding some excuse for not acting. This cannot be right, for a minute or two later, thinking he has found
Claudius in the ignominious and dishonourable position of eavesdropping behind the arras in Gertrude's
chamber, he kills him—only to find that it is Polonius. The killing of Polonius is a major climax. In spite of
whatever doubts and mental stress about the authority of the Ghost and the meaning of its message, about the
need to do the deed or the good it would do, here deliberately and violently he keeps his word and carries out
his revenge; and he kills the wrong man. This terrible irony is the direct result of his decisions since the end of
the play scene, which imply his belief in his power to control the destinies in this life and in the after-life of
both Gertrude and Claudius, his assumption of the role of Providence itself.

From the killing of Polonius the catastrophe of the play stems. This false completion of Hamlet's revenge
initiates the second cycle of revenge for a murdered father, that of Laertes for Polonius. That revenge is
successful and ends in the death of Hamlet. By unwittingly killing Polonius, Hamlet brings about his own
death.

The Closet Scene

Nothing in the play is more bizarre than that Hamlet, having committed the terrible error of killing Polonius,
should be so consumed with the desire to purge and rescue his mother that he goes right on with his
castigation even with the dead body of Polonius at his feet. No wonder the Ghost enters again to whet his
'almost blunted purpose'. Hamlet well knows that in this present heat ('time and passion') he should be
obedient to his vow and apply himself to a grimmer task. But he does nothing. It is remarkable that he fears
the presence of the Ghost will actually weaken his resolve to kill Claudius: that his response to this shape of
his dead father will be pity not retribution. The Ghost could 'convert / My stern effects' and there would be
'tears perchance for blood' (3.4.126-29). This fear for the strength of his resolution should be compared with
the heavy-heartedness at the prospect of carrying out the execution as he looks at Polonius's corpse: 'Thus bad
begins and worse remains behind' (180).

There seems no deep compunction for Polonius's death, however, and no lessening of the sense of his
privilege to ordain for others.
For this same lord,
I do repent; but heaven hath pleased it so,
To punish me with this, and this with me,
That I must be their scourge and minister.

(3.4.173-6)

Poor Polonius! Hamlet is at his worst in these scenes. His self-righteousness expands in his violent rebukes of his mother and his eagerness to order her sex-life. 'Forgive me this my virtue', he says, going on to explain that in these upside-down times 'virtue itself of vice must pardon beg'. Yet the force of his words, and what appears to be the first intimation that her husband was murdered, instil into her that sense of difference which he has fought to re-establish. At the beginning she asks in indignation and bewilderment, 'What have I done?' But later she says, let, speak no more', and 'What shall I do?'

To England

From this point onwards there are two plays of Hamlet, that of the second quarto and that of the Folio. I have argued . . . that the Folio version with its omissions and additions has much to be said for it, knowing what its hero has become by the end of the closet scene in a way that the seemingly more tentative and exploratory version in the second quarto does not. The changes in the Folio substitute for a rather contradictory talkativeness in Hamlet about being sent to England with his revenge unaccomplished a silence as mysterious and suggestive as the silence that lies between Acts 1 and 2. They also add a central passage in 5.2 in which the problem of damnation which has occupied Hamlet throughout is given an answer.

There is a real want of resolution concerning his revenge in Hamlet's going away to England, though it is concealed in the exciting scenes in which he courageously and scornfully spars with Claudius, who is now absolutely determined to destroy the man who knows his secret. It may be that he is biding his time, or is baffled and mortified by his own inability to act, as the two main passages omitted from the Folio suggest, but we feel that there are deeper things restraining him, hinted at in what he says to Horatio when he comes back.

Sir, in my heart there was a kind of fighting
That would not let me sleep.

(5.2.4-5)

While Hamlet is away, we see the effects of what he has so far achieved, in the madness of Ophelia and the furious return of Laertes. To avenge his father is for Laertes an inalienable duty, whatever may be its status in the eternal world.

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.

(4.5.132-6)

For Hamlet it is quite the contrary. Revenge in itself is uninteresting and foreign. It is only the question of its place as a creative and restorative 'remembering' deed within the values of the eternal world that is important to him.
The Return

The news of Hamlet's return astounds the king, and he hastens to employ Laertes in a scheme to destroy him finally. Act 5 opens with the two clowns digging a grave for Ophelia. The joke of the senior of these, the sexton, that of all men he who builds strongest is the gravedigger, is something to ponder on at the end of the play. The sexton is the only person in the play who is a match for Hamlet in the combat of words. He manages to avoid answering Hamlet's question, 'Whose grave's this?' Not until the funeral procession arrives does Hamlet learn that the grave is for Ophelia, and it does not appear from the play that he was aware of her madness. Many people feel that in Hamlet's reflections over the empty grave on the vanity of life and the inevitability of death there is a mature and sober wisdom. But the presentation of this wisdom is entirely ironic. His truths are based on a chasm of ignorance. He speaks his words over a grave which he does not know is intended for a woman whose madness and death he is responsible for. The fact of the dead girl punctures his philosophy. For us, at any rate. He never speaks of his regret for the suffering he caused her even before Polonius's death. On the contrary, when Laertes leaps into the grave and expresses, too clamantly perhaps, an affection for Ophelia which he genuinely feels, Hamlet will not accept it, and chooses this moment to advance and declare himself, with a challenge to Laertes' sincerity. He claims I loved Ophelia'—with a love forty thousand brothers could not match. It is hard to know what right Hamlet has to say that when we think of how we have seen him treat her. The dispute over Ophelia's grave seems very important. Laertes is more than a foil to Hamlet; he is a main antagonist, diametrically opposed to him in every way of thought and action, who is scheming to kill him by a dreadful trick. But Shakespeare refuses to belittle him or let us despise him. And he refuses to sentimentalise his opponent or whitewash his failings. For those of us who to any extent 'believe in' Hamlet, Shakespeare makes things difficult in this scene. It is tragedy not sentimental drama that he is writing, and our division of mind about Hamlet is partly why the play is a tragedy.

In the all-important colloquy with Horatio at the beginning of the final scene, Hamlet tells him of the strong sense he has that his impulsive actions on board ship were guided by a divinity which takes over from us 'when our deep plots do pall' and redirects us. This is a critical juncture of the play, implying Hamlet's surrender of his grandiose belief in his power to ordain and control, and his release from the alternating belief in the meaningless and mindless drift of things. His recognition, vital though it is, is his own, and we do not necessarily have to share it.

The sense of heaven guiding him reinforces rather than diminishes his sense of personal responsibility for completing his mission. The discovery of the king's treachery in the commission to have him murdered in England has fortified Hamlet's determination. Yet it is with a demand for assurance that he puts the matter to Horatio.

Does it not, think thee, stand me now upon—
He that hath killed my king, and whored my mother,
Popped in between th'election and my hopes,
Thrown out his angle for my proper life,
And with such cozenage—is't not perfect conscience
To quit him with this arm? And is't not to be damned
To let this canker of our nature come
In further evil?

(5.2.63-70)

It is difficult to see how we can take this speech except as the conclusion of a long and deep perplexity. But if it is a conclusion, that question mark—conveying so much more than indignation—makes it an appeal by this loneliest of heroes for support and agreement, which he pointedly does not get from the cautious Horatio, who
simply says,

It must be shortly known to him from England
What is the issue of the business there.

Horatio won't accept the responsibility of answering, and only gives him the exasperating response that he hasn't much time.

Once again Hamlet has raised the question of conscience and damnation. Conscience is no longer an obstacle to action, but encourages it. As for damnation, Hamlet had felt the threat of it if he contemplated suicide, felt the threat of it if he were to kill at the behest of a devil-ghost; now he feels the threat of it if he should fail to remove from the world a cancer which is spreading. This new image for Claudius, a 'canker of our nature', is important. All the vituperation which Hamlet has previously thrown at Claudius seems mere rhetoric by this. Hamlet now sees himself undertaking a surgical operation to remove a cancer from human society. Whether the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune continue or not is immaterial. To neglect, ignore or encourage the evil is to imperil one's soul.

The Silence of the Ghost

When in reply to Hamlet's unanswerable question Horatio tells him that if he is going to act he had better move quickly, because as soon as Claudius learns the fate of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Hamlet won't have another hour to live, Hamlet exclaims 'The interim's mine.' But of course it isn't, because the plot against his life has already been primed and is about to go off. Hamlet has no time left to act upon his new conviction that it is a religious duty to strike down Claudius. He accepts the fake challenge of the fencing match in the awareness that something may be afoot, and he faces it without any exhilaration: 'Thou wouldst not think how ill all's here about my heart.' When he says 'If it be now, 'tis not to come . . . the readiness is all', we assume he has some kind of prevision of what actually happens, the coming together of his revenge and his own death. Laertes wounds him fatally before he is able to make his second attempt to kill the king. The first time, he killed the wrong man; the second time, he kills the king indeed, but not until he is within moments of his own death.

There is no doubt of the extent of Hamlet's failure. In trying to restore 'the beauteous majesty of Denmark' he has brought the country into an even worse state, in the hands of a foreigner. He is responsible, directly or indirectly, for the deaths of Polonius, Ophelia, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. With more justification, he has killed Laertes and Claudius. But if his uncle is dead, so is his mother.

What does the Ghost think of it all? He has disappeared. There is no word of approval, or sorrow, or anger. He neither praises his dead son nor blames him. Nor, if he was a devil, does he come back to gloat over the devastation he has caused. The rest is silence indeed.22

In Kyd's *Spanish Tragedy*, the ghost of the dead Andrea and his escort from the infernal world of spirits, named Revenge, were on stage during the whole of the play. It was absolutely clear that the ultimate direction of things was entirely in the hands of the gods of the underworld. At the end of the play Andrea rejoiced in the fulfilment of his revenge and happily surveyed the carnage on the stage. 'Ay, these were spectacles to please my soul!' He helped to apportion eternal sentences, whose 'justice' makes our blood run cold.

In spite of the seeming crudity of *The Spanish Tragedy*, it is a subtle and sinister view of the relation of gods and men that the play conveys. Kyd's gods are dark gods. Men and women plot and scheme to fulfil their desires and satisfy their hatreds, they appeal to heaven for guidance, help and approval, but the dark gods are in charge of everything, and they use every morsel of human striving in order to achieve their predestined purposes. Hieronimo's heroic efforts to obtain justice, which drive him into madness and his wife to suicide,
are nothing to the gods except as they may be used to fulfil their promise to Andrea.

*Hamlet* resists the grim certainties of Kyd's theology and the certainties of any other. Hamlet's own belief towards the end of the play that a benign divinity works through our spontaneous impulses and even our mistakes is neither clearly endorsed by the play nor repudiated in ironic Kydean laughter. Hamlet is a tragic hero who at a time of complete despair hears a mysterious voice uttering a directive which he interprets as a mission to renovate the world by an act of purifying violence. But this voice is indeed a questionable voice. How far it is the voice of heaven, how its words are to be translated into human deeds, how far the will of man can change the course of the world—these are questions that torment the idealist as he continues to plague the decadent inhabitants, as he sees them, of the Danish court.

His doubts, at one edge of his nature, are as extreme as his confidence at the other. His sense of his freedom to create his own priorities and decisions, and indeed his sense of being heaven's scourge and minister privileged to destroy at will, bring him to the disaster of killing Polonius, from which point all changes, and he becomes the hunted as well as the hunter. Eventually, in a new humility as his 'deep plots' pall, Hamlet becomes convinced that heaven is guiding him and that the removal of Claudius is a task that he is to perform at the peril of his immortal soul. He does indeed kill Claudius, but the cost is dreadful. What has he achieved, as he dies with Claudius?

It is very hard for us in the twentieth century to sympathise with Hamlet and his mission. Hearing voices from a higher world belongs mainly in the realm of abnormal psychology. Revenge may be common but is hardly supportable. The idea of purifying violence belongs to terrorist groups. Gertrude's sexual behaviour and remarriage do not seem out of the ordinary. Yet if we feel that twentieth-century doubt hampers our understanding of the seventeenth-century *Hamlet*, we must remember that *Hamlet* was actually written in our own age of doubt and revaluation—only a little nearer its beginning. *Hamlet* takes for granted that the ethics of revenge are questionable, that ghosts are questionable, that the distinctions of society are questionable, and that the will of heaven is terribly obscure. The higher truth which Hamlet tries to make active in a fallen world belongs to a past which he sees slipping away from him. Shakespeare movingly presents the beauty of a past in which kingship, marriage and the order of society had or was believed to have a heavenly sanction. A brutal Cain-like murder destroys the order of the past. Hamlet struggles to restore the past, and as he does so we feel that the desirability is delicately and perilously balanced against the futility. Shakespeare was by no means eager to share Nietzsche's acquiescence in time's *es war*. This matter of balance is an essential part of our answer about the ending of the play. It is a precarious balance, and perhaps impossible to maintain.

The Elizabethans too doubted ghosts. Shakespeare used the concern of his time about voices and visions to suggest the treacherousness of communication with the transcendent world. We come in the end to accept the Ghost not as a devil but as a spirit who speaks truth yet who cannot with any sufficiency or adequacy provide the answer to Hamlet's cry, 'What should we do?' Everything depends on interpretation and translation. A terrible weight of responsibility is thrown on to the human judgement and will. Kierkegaard, in *Fear and Trembling*, spoke of Abraham hearing a voice from heaven and trusting it to the extent of being willing to kill his own son; and he wrote brilliantly of the knife-edge which divides an act of faith from a demoniacal impulse. In Shakespeare's age, William Tyndale also used Abraham as an example of where faith might go outside the boundaries of ethics, but he warned against 'holy works' which had their source in what he contemptuously called 'man's imaginations'. These distinctions between acts of faith and the demoniacal, between holy works and works of man's imagination, seem fundamental to *Hamlet*. We know that Hamlet made a mess of what he was trying to do. The vital question is whether what he was trying to do was a holy work or a work of man's imagination. Shakespeare refuses to tell us.

Hamlet's attempt to make a higher truth operative in the world of Denmark, which is where all of us live, is a social and political disaster, and it pushes him into inhumanity and cruelty. But the unanswerable question, 'Is't not to be damned / To let this canker of our nature come / In further evil?', if it could be answered 'Yes!'
would make us see the chance-medley of the play's ending in a light so different that it would abolish our merely moral judgement. Bradley's final remark on the play was that 'the apparent failure of Hamlet's life is not the ultimate truth concerning him'.

But it might be. That is where the tragic balance lies. The play of Hamlet takes place within the possibility that there is a higher court of values than those which operate around us, within the possibility of having some imperfect communication with that court, within the possibility that an act of violence can purify, within the possibility that the words 'salvation' and 'damnation' have meaning. To say that these possibilities are certainties is to wreck the play as surely as to say they are impossibilities.

So the silence of the Ghost at the end of the play leaves the extent of Hamlet's victory or triumph an open question. To answer it needs a knowledge that Horatio didn't have, that Shakespeare didn't have, that we don't have. The mortal havoc is plain to our eyes on the stage; the rest is silence. . . .

Notes


2 NV II, 292-3 gives brief selections from Morrison's 1846 translation of Shakespeares Dramatische Kunst; see further L. D. Schmitz's 1876 translation of Ulrici's third edition.

3 Nietzsche, Birth of Tragedy, section 17; translated by F. Golffing, Anchor Books, 1956, p. 103. The word translated as 'objective correlative' is Objectivation.

4 Mallarmé, Crayonné au théâtre; Oeuvres complètes, Gallimard, 1945, pp. 300-2.

5 Oeuvres complètes, p. 1564.

6 Eliot, gSelected Essays, 1932, pp. 141-6.

7 Masefield's Introduction is reprinted in his William Shakespeare in the Home University Library, n.d. [1911].


10 As late as 1981 we can find John Bayley repeating Knight's view that Claudius's advice to Hamlet to forget his father's death shows a mature understanding of 'how life must be lived' (Shakespeare and Tragedy, p. 179). See note to 1.2.102.


12 Except in those advanced places which followed Lascelles Abercrombie and E. E. Stoll in denying that there was any problem of delay to be solved. See Abercrombie, The Idea of Great Poetry, 1925, and Stoll, Art and Artifice in Shakespeare, 1933 (using Hamlet material from 1919).

13 Prosser, Hamlet and Revenge, pp. 102-6.

14 Alexander, Poison, Play, and Duel, pp. 32-3.


17 ‘Des Willens Widerwille gegen die Zeit und ihr "Es war".’


19 See Prosser, *Hamlet and Revenge*, pp. 261-75.


22 The absence of the Ghost at the end, in contrast with *The Spanish Tragedy*, is noted by H. Levin, *The Question of ‘Hamlet’*, 1959, p. 98. A view of the reason for the Ghost’s disappearance which is very different from mine is given in two adjoining articles in *Shakespeare Survey* 30 (1977), by Philip Brockbank (p. 107) and Barbara Everett (p. 118).

23 The view that Shakespeare is making a positive comment on Kyd is developed in Edwards, *Shakespeare and Kyd*, in *Shakespeare, Man of the Theatre*, ed. ir, J. L. Halio and D. J. Palmer, 1983.


26 *Shakespearean Tragedy*, p. 174.

**Hamlet (Vol. 44): Psychoanalytic Interpretations**

**H. R. Coursen (essay date 1982)**


[In the following essay, originally presented in 1982, Coursen argues that a Jungian analysis of Hamlet clarifies some of the critical problems of traditional Freudian analysis. Coursen suggests that Hamlet's oedipal issues are themselves symptoms of "a deeper disturbance within Hamlet's psyche, that is, his inability to contact his feminine soul' or anima."]

**I**

Tragic man rejects the compensatory energy of the psyche. In tragedy *hamartia* can often be defined as the hero's alienation from the *anima*, or the feminine principle within him. Iago flatters Othello's self-conception, or persona, into alienation from a Desdemona who had seen "Othello's visage in his mind" (Liii.255), not just in his "occupation" (III.iii.362). Lear discovers the feminine in him, or it discovers him after his passionate efforts to keep "this mother" from his "heart" (II.iv.55) have obliterated his former consciousness. He awakens
to the loving gaze of his "child, Cordelia" (IV.vii.72). Macbeth's nature, "too full o' th' milk of human kindness" (I.v. 17) is discarded for a "mind . . . full of scorpions" (III.ii.39). Hamlet, however, is the preeminent example of the rejection of the feminine.

All Hamlet criticism must be "psychological criticism," even when it claims to be anything but. The play is uniquely framed to elicit from its auditors a subjective response. No matter how "objective" a critic may try to be, he must, in dealing with Hamlet, answer the question with which the play opens: "Who's there?" (I.i.1). Any claim to critical objectivity signals an inevitable surrender to unperceived subjectivity. The critic invariably stands and unfolds himself even as he believes that he is illuminating that universe of shadows that is Hamlet character and Hamlet play.

The greatest critics, I believe, admit their subjective stance and do not claim to tell us "what Hamlet means," but "what Hamlet means to me." It follows then, that the quality of the critique is not a function of any particular critical approach but of the human qualities of the critic himself.

We would not normally term Dr. Samuel Johnson a "psychological critic." Johnson, however, had the courage—not always shared by his 18th century colleagues—to admit that the plays moved him profoundly. His reaction to the death of Cordelia, for example, must be attributed to more than that the ending of King Lear may have violated Johnson's critical criteria:

I might relate that I was many years ago so shocked by Cordelia's death, that I know not whether I ever endured to read again the last scenes of the play 'till I undertook to revise them as editor.1

These words emerge, of course, during the almost century-and-a-half that Tate's happier version of King Lear was performed exclusively.

Johnson's comments on Hamlet suggest that he looks upon the character as somehow "real," or, at least, that Hamlet conforms to Johnson's sense of "nature." "I wish," Johnson says, "Hamlet had made some other defence [to Laertes, before the duel]; it is unsuitable to the character of a good or brave man, to shelter himself in falsehood."2 Placed against Dr. Johnson's standard of "suitability," Hamlet disturbs the critic. In objecting to the psychology Shakespeare attributes to Hamlet, Johnson reveals his own psychology, one predicated on solid 18th century norms of decorum and stereotypic humanity.

Johnson could have read neither Thomas Erskine's defense of James Hadfield (26 June, 1800)—perhaps the first defense by reason of insanity—nor Darrow's defense of Loeb and Leopold, both of which Shakespeare anticipates in Hamlet's apology to Laertes. Hamlet, of course, is his own attorney. Later experience seems suddenly to illuminate what Shakespeare already knew. And, although Johnson's moral criteria are not our own, he turns out to be right. He can wish for another defense, but Shakespeare gives Hamlet the only apology he can make for the sudden, impulsive, and destructive actions of someone who is and is not Hamlet:

Was't Hamlet wrong'd Laertes? Never Hamlet.  
If Hamlet from himself be ta'en away,  
And when he's not himself does wrong Laertes,  
Then Hamlet does it not. Hamlet denies it.  
Who does it then? His madness. If t be so,  
Hamlet is of the faction that is wrong'd,  
His madness is poor Hamlet's enemy.

(V.ii.230-237).
Since I do not believe that Hamlet is ever mad, except "north-north-west" (II.ii.278). I believe that he does fabricate an elegant falsehood here, one that does not square with anyone's sense of goodness or bravery. That his repressed feeling level leaps past his rational persona—as it does so often in this play—and incites actions that puzzle Hamlet, making of him a Hamlet who does not square with his own sense of his personality, can only be termed, at best, "temporary insanity." The arm that struggled to put the sword back on its hanger as Claudius knelt at apparent prayer leaped out, almost by its own volition, to impale Polonius. But Hamlet "thought" it might be the king. Was he insane, or just mistaken? His mistake, however motivated by a sudden flash of feeling, becomes, later, "His madness." But, by then, before the full court, Hamlet cannot say to Laertes, "I thought your father was King Claudius."

We would agree, I believe, that Coleridge is a psychological critic, perhaps the first to whom the term can be applied, in that Coleridge is conscious of the admixture of his own personality that enters into his response. The results are brilliant and eccentric, profound and idiosyncratic, as great Hamlet criticism must be, for a reason Coleridge arrives at in discussing the Prince:

Hamlet's character is the prevalence of the abstracting and generalizing habit over the practical. He does not want courage, skill, will or opportunity, but every incident sets him thinking; and it is curious and at the same time strictly natural that Hamlet, who all the play seems reason itself, should be impelled at last by mere accident to effect his object. I have a smack of Hamlet myself, if I may say so . . .

All of us, perhaps, have a smack of Hamlet ourselves. We do not, however, see Hamlet as Coleridge did—Hamlet as ineffective intellectual, "Hamlet as Coleridge"—or as the romantic Hamlet of Henry Irving, laying the back of his hand against his brow as he ponders the enormities of Elsinore, or as the slender delicate vase in which an oak tree is planted, as in Goethe's brilliant metaphor.

If we extend Coleridge's insight, however, we may discover a generalization that incorporates it. Here is one possibility, presented by Bradley Pearson, the protagonist of Iris Murdoch's The Black Prince: "Shakespeare [in Hamlet] makes the crisis of his own identity into the very central stuff of his art. He transmutes his private obsessions into a rhetoric so public that it can be mumbled by any child. . . . Shakespeare cries out in agony, he writhes, he dances, he laughs, he shrieks, and he makes us laugh and shriek ourselves out of hell." Even if Pearson incorporates a rather radical interpretation of Aristotelian catharsis and the fallacy of reading back to an author's creative process, he accounts for the continuum of energy that gets exchanged between Shakespeare's creation and our own psychology of perception. The case for that continuum is made brilliantly in Norman Holland's book, Shakespeare and Psychoanalysis. Holland restricts his thesis to Freudian concepts of psychic energy by suggesting that a play like Hamlet moves us by recapitulating our own infantile fears and fantasies. It may do that, of course, but it does much more than that, eliciting, as Coleridge proves, our response to who we think we are as adults as well. Hamlet may be, as T.S. Eliot says, "the Mona Lisa of Literature," but Hamlet is a play, an action that imitates action, not a painting. As Bradley Pearson says, "Being is acting. We are tissues and tissues of different personae, and yet we are nothing at all."

The fiction that is Hamlet, then, reveals whatever "reality" inheres in us and, in turn, exposes the fictional premises of that perceived reality, particularly if we, like Coleridge, respond to Hamlet from the level of our own mere persona. Pursued to its conclusion, Pearson's thesis that being is acting and acting being would seem to equate not to a set of existential premises but to a cultural and personal nihilism. Hamlet the play will not support that conclusion, even though nihilism is one dimension that Hamlet and the play surrounding him explore. We might pursue Pearson's suggestion further to suggest that Hamlet's belief that "things" only "rank and gross possess" his "unweeded garden" (I.ii. 135-136) signals a "mid-life crisis," that terrible moment of pause, often activated by catastrophic personal emergencies, when psychic content, dormant for a lifetime, explodes within us with bewildering force. Suffice it that the principals of this play had reached Elizabethan mid-life by 1601: Hamlet is 30. Richard Burbage, playing Hamlet, is 34. And William Shakespeare is 37.
The 19th century critic who tended to read the plays back to the psyche of their creator was, of course, Edward Dowden. His work has been undervalued because of his simplistic categorization of Shakespeare's "moods" and his assignment of the plays to those moods. But here is Dowden's remarkable description of Hamlet's behavior after the play-within-the-play: "Hamlet is forever walking over the ice; his power of self-control is never quite to be trusted. The success of his device for ascertaining the guilt of Claudius is followed by the same mood of wild excitement which followed his encounter with his father's spirit; again he seems incoherently, extravagantly gay; again his words are 'wild and whirling words.'" Dowden's Hamlet is hardly Coleridge's, "who all the play seems reason itself." Dowden captures Hamlet's erratic nature, as does Derek Jacobi, who played the role recently both at the Old Vic and in the BBC-TV version: "Hamlet swings into sudden intensely traumatic states." Interestingly, Jacobi does not include Hamlet's behavior after "Gonzago" in his catalogue of these traumatic states. At that moment in the play, Hamlet believes that he has won:

"For if the king like not the comedy,  
Why then, believe, he likes it not, perdy."

(III.ii.291-292).

I shall suggest that Hamlet himself has dictated, only moments before, something other than comedy for himself, and for the play which bears his name.

It remained for perhaps the greatest of Shakespearean critics, A.C. Bradley, to provide a version of Hamlet's character that would account for its inconsistencies. Bradley's thesis, of course, is "melancholy," which Bradley says is "neither dejection, nor yet insanity." Bradley rejects the inherited view that Hamlet's actions and inactions emerge from an unfortunate synthesis between the thesis of revenge and the antithesis of Hamlet's character, or, as Bradley states the case, that Hamlet is "sure he ought to obey the ghost: but in the depth of his nature, and unknown to himself, there is a moral repulsion to the deed." "We are meant in the play," Bradley asserts, "to assume that he ought to have obeyed the Ghost." Perhaps we are, although I believe that Bradley's certainty is open to question. What do we mean by revenge? How could Hamlet have obeyed the Ghost and remained true to "the depth of his nature"? That, of course, depends upon what we take Hamlet's nature to be. To define that "nature" is perhaps impossible, since the character of Hamlet forces our own natures to participate in his. It may be, however, as J.C. Maxwell suggests, that Hamlet is an incomparable revenge play precisely because its brilliant and introspective central character does not raise the issue of revenge per se to the level of his conscious consideration. Thus, a basic issue of the play remains an underlying—and unconscious—energy within Hamlet. I shall suggest, however, that Hamlet fails to coordinate his perceived mission with his own nature. Tragedy is the result of this disjunction between outer and inner imperatives.

Bradley goes on to suggest how much his thesis of "melancholy" incorporates. It accounts for Hamlet's lethargy as well as for his sudden leaps of energy, for Hamlet's procrastination and, crucially, for his inability to understand why he delays. Thus does Bradley create a pre-Freudian unconsciousness in Hamlet, a level of his psyche unavailable to him. Hamlet's doubt about the Ghost, Bradley claims, "is no genuine doubt; it is an unconscious fiction, an excuse for his delay and its continuance." Of Hamlet's refusal to kill Claudius in the Prayer Scene, Bradley says, "That this again is an unconscious excuse for delay is now pretty generally agreed." Bradley invokes consensus when it suits him, as we all do. But he is hardly consistent. "Although Hamlet's own account of his reasons for arranging the play-scene may be questioned," Bradley says, "it is impossible to suppose that, if his real design had been to provoke an open confession of guilt [from Claudius], he could have been unconscious of this design." Since Hamlet expresses the possibility of open confession, even if imputing the possibility to a generic "guilty creature . . . sitting at a play," one could argue that, as he speaks the lines, he is conscious of the design Bradley denies to Hamlet's consciousness. Bradley is very selective about what Hamlet is conscious of and unconscious about, as perhaps, we all are. While neither
Bradley nor Bradley's Hamlet contemplate the possibility of Claudius's open confession, I suggest that Hamlet does do so. Suffice it for now that the confession does not occur.

I conclude this survey with a recent qualification of "character" criticism delivered by Phillip Goldstein. He will serve to introduce the Freudian approach to the character of Hamlet.

Goldstein argues, as Francis Fergusson, Michael Long, and Philip Brockbank have, that psychological critics neglect the public reasons for Hamlet's inaction. By narrowing the play to the context of an inner psychic struggle, the psychological critics ignore the social and political realities that impinge upon Hamlet's potential range of action. Thus Coleridge, Goldstein says, "In his reduction of Hamlet's hesitation to an unwarranted need to think . . . neglects not only the complexities of the new ethics of revenge but also the dilemma of the new politics of absolute monarchy." 18

I am not sure what Goldstein means by "new" in either instance. He does, however, extend Hamlet's psychological problems into the world of the play, discerning in the latter area some sources for Hamlet's "inner" problems:

Hamlet's dilemmas transcend his peculiarities because these dilemmas include the large ideological conflict between the Elizabethan faith in the great chain of being and the court's bourgeois subordination of reason to passion . . . [Hamlet's] recognition of the heavy requirements of rational action turns his analyzing into more than a weak withdrawal into a private world, and the disorder of the universe, the degradation of reason by bestial passion, turns his melancholy into more than a morbid sensitivity. 19

Thus the Marxist critic places an isolated psychic structure into a context which, among other things, defines the nature of Hamlet's isolation. It could be argued, however, that even the Ghost, a figure of the "old order" and, presumably a refugee from Purgatory, is guilty of the subordination of reason to passion for which Goldstein indicts the court of Claudius. Goldstein seems guilty, as well, of placing a 19th century version of Hamlet against a society conceived by Hermann Hesse. Yet the "world of the play"—its conflicts and those factors over which even a crown prince has no control—do tend to be ignored by psychological critics, in one version of the "misreading" against which I. A. Richards warns.

As I have argued elsewhere, 20 Denmark would seem to have been torn away from the protective and positive powers of the supernature. Denmark cannot contact the outer mystery with any effective ritual. A regicide reigns. More than "the time" is out of joint, however basic time is as a palpable rhythm of the supernature. Hamlet's task is impossible, is it not?—to revenge and at the same time to restore Denmark to its former status—an edenic model akin to the England that Gaunt remembers in Richard II. The earlier play is also shadowed by a murder committed before the play begins, and Gaunt is trapped with "this England" (II.i.50) in an inexorable historical process which cannot be reversed. As Gaunt speaks, it is already too late. Hamlet, however, is involved in a tragic action. If he is a tragic hero, his is the decision—the hamartia—that determines his destiny and that of Denmark. If it is also too late for Hamlet as the play begins, then he becomes merely a victim of social, political, psychological, and cosmic context—not the hero on whose "choice depends/The safety and health of this whole state" (I.iii.20-21).

I agree with Goldstein that the Freudians tend to concentrate on the inner conflicts that render Hamlet incapable of killing Claudius, thus ignoring the titanic external issues that confront Hamlet. Such neglect of the play's "world" equates to thinking too precisely on a "psychic" event isolated in Hamlet's unknown infancy and excited into potency by events that have occurred shortly before the play begins. A more important question, however, may be—should Hamlet kill Claudius? The Ghost, after all, does not so demand, unless we equate his word "act" with "kill".
But howsoever thou pursues this act,
Taint not thy mind, nor let thy soul contrive
Against thy mother aught. Leave her to heaven . . .
(I.v.85-87)

The Freudians suggest that Hamlet's "mind" is already "tainted," and that the source of the contamination is his mother. If they are correct, Hamlet is trapped in a dilemma that all men face, caught in a psychic crossfire that can destroy the souls of the best of men. The Ghost's positive injunction in re Gertrude has already been cancelled by negative forces in Hamlet's psyche.

II

The classic of psychoanalytic criticism is, of course, Ernest Jones's Hamlet and Oedipus. Jones argues that Claudius has taken Hamlet's place with Gertrude, and that although Hamlet's incestuous desire is, obviously, unconscious, it blocks him from killing his alter ego, Claudius. Lucianus "nephew to the king" (III.ii.242), as Hamlet identifies him, can do so in "Gonzago," when "something like the murder of [Hamlet's] father" (II.ii.596) is conflated in Hamlet's psyche with his wish to kill Claudius, a point I shall develop more fully later. Lucianus, then, is not a "Claudius figure" but a psychic substitute for Hamlet's desire to kill his uncle. Hamlet interrupts "Gonzago" after the murder of the recumbent Duke, but before the "murderer gets the love of Gonzago's wife" (III.ii.261-262). The son's oedipal fantasy is fulfilled in the murder of Hamlet Sr.-Claudius, and Hamlet blocks his new rival, Lucianus-Claudius by stopping the further fantasy of play-within. As the Closet Scene makes clear, Hamlet would keep Claudius from Gertrude in "reality." The play-within-the-play, as Hamlet experiences it, involves a confusing meshing of identities. Hamlet, however, under the compulsion of the oedipal drive interrupts a play that never begins again. In identifying Lucianus as "nephew to the King" (III.ii.242). Hamlet identifies his current status. The play-within, after all has been about a Duke, and Claudius is brother to the king. It follows, from the Freudian perspective, that Hamlet himself would be the illicit lover of Gertrude-Baptista, His interruption of "Gonzago," then, signals the psychic pressure imposed by the incest taboo.

Jones argues that Hamlet can only kill Claudius once Gertrude is dead. At that point, Hamlet has no compunctions about going after Claudius with both rapier and chalice. It could be argued, of course, that Claudius has, at last, provided Hamlet with sufficient and public reasons for the King's "execution," and that Hamlet knows that he himself is doomed at that point. While he has ample knowledge already that Claudius would have him dispatched, and should therefore have more than a premonitory fear of the duel, Hamlet's response to Claudius before the duel is that of a renaissance prince with his sovereign, as Knight has pointed out. Strange behavior in view of the list of grievances Hamlet has presented to Horatio, which, for Hamlet, justifies his "quit [ting Claudius] with this arm" (V.ii.68), but behavior arguing some continuing "mental—or psychic—block" within Hamlet. The use of poison—a fate often reserved for lust, in Middleton, Tourneur, and elsewhere in Shakespeare—enforces the Freudian case. Father, Uncle, Mother, and Son die by a poison bubbling out of sexuality, real or fantasized. The son is the victim of an oedipus complex that blocks Hamlet from killing his alter ego uncle until the mother is dead. The case is compelling, and cannot be dismissed merely because, as Kenneth Muir says, "some critics . . . argue that as Freud's theories were not propounded until 300 years after Shakespeare began to write, it is absurd for us to interpret the play in the light of psychoanalysis."21 The play's suggestion of an "oedipus complex," some 2100 years after Sophocles created his vivid version of the myth, may at least account for the fascination of male critics with the character of Hamlet, even those critics—perhaps particularly those critics—who reject the Freudian formulation vehemently. We can never neglect Shakespeare's "final cause"—our continuing response to his art.

"Hamlet," Jones argues, "is . . . in a dilemma between on the one hand allowing his natural detestation of his uncle to have free play, a consummation which would stir still further his own horrible wishes, and on the
other hand, ignoring the imperative call for the vengeance that his obvious duty demands. His own 'evil' prevents him from completely denouncing his uncle's, and in continuing to 'repress' the former [his incestuous desires], he must strive to ignore, to condone, and if possible even to forget the latter [that is, Claudius's usurpation of Hamlet's place with Gertrude]; his moral fate is bound up with his uncle's for good or ill. In reality his uncle incorporates the deepest and most buried part of his personality, so that he cannot kill him without killing himself (Jones's ital.)

While I find Jones's unquestioning acceptance of Hamlet's "obvious duty" suspect, this argument is compelling. Hamlet could, it seems, kill Claudius if not facing a mirror held up to Hamlet's inner nature, and given the impulse of a recently frustrated rapier. The man behind the arras, however, turns out to be Polonius.

We might argue against Jones that Hamlet—except before the duel—does not do a very good job of ignoring, condoning, or forgetting Claudius's occupation of Hamlet's motherland—hardly "a little patch of ground" (IV.iv.18) in the psychic sense. The Freud-Jones thesis, however, is seductive. It explains motivation that seems unarticulated in the play, and action or inaction that seems unmotivated. Certainly Hamlet and Claudius—"mighty opposites" (V.ii.62) as Hamlet recognizes—are bound together in an inextricable fatality. The psychic linkage reaches its climax in "Gonzago," as I shall suggest, a play to which Hamlet responds far more vividly than does Claudius. Certainly Hamlet does swell with disgust upon his mother's matron-boned sexuality, perhaps even projecting his own unconscious wishes into his hissing "to post/With such dexterity to incestuous sheets" (I.ii. 156-157). Hamlet extrapolates her "frailty" (I.ii. 146) to include all women. He berates himself for his own "unpregnant" response to what Jones calls and Hamlet seems consciously to see as "his obvious duty." Hamlet's incapacity, as he views it, equates to the activity of the basest of women. He "Must, like a whore, unpack [his] heart with words,/ And fall a-cursing like a very drab; a stallion" (II.ii.587-588). He compensates for his perceived failure with torrents of self-accusation in which his own frailty must be equated to the "hire and salary" (III.iii.79) of female prostitution.

Against the Freud-Jones theory, however, other Freudians launch objections. Here we begin, perhaps, to discern the reductio-ad-absurdum of "method" in the hands of lesser practitioners. Avi Erlich, in Hamlet's Absent Father, calls Freud's "hunch" about Hamlet "misleading." Erlich isolates the problem in what could be termed a sector of the oedipal dilemma, in Hamlet's difficulty in dealing with his pater absconditus. "Perhaps," says Erlich, "Shakespeare disguised a fantasy of an infantile son witnessing his father's castration at night by having an adult son encounter a victimized nocturnal ghost of his father." Perhaps. For me, the play deals in sufficient depth with the problems of appearance versus reality, even if that depth entices others to seek yet a deeper level. Suffice it that it follows, as Erlich argues, "that if Hamlet needs to weaken himself, make himself antic, wish himself away, in order to prove his father strong, he is unfortunately going to deprive himself of just the strength he needs his father to model for him." "Thus," says Erlich, "one reason for Hamlet's not being strong enough to kill Claudius is . . . that his father, his model and namesake, was also not strong enough to kill him."

This view projects Hamlet into a self-destructive search for a male role-model for the action Hamlet believes he should perform. And, since Hamlet cannot find positive "maleness" within himself, but discovers, instead, negative "femaleness," the case has merit. Trapped between contrary fantasies of masculine power and feminine impotence, Hamlet is himself unmanned, frozen "between two worlds/One dead, the other powerless to be born"—to borrow Matthew Arnold's remarkably useful phrase. The problem, as Erlich expresses it, is not the desire for the mother, but the need within Hamlet for a present and consistent image of maleness. The argument does not rule out the oedipus problem, but complicates the "solution" Jones claimed to have discovered. Erlich's thesis, however, may suggest that we need more comprehensive theory, as opposed to a "corrective" based on psychoanalysis.

One is tempted to respond to Erlich on the level of persona and say, "Dammit, Hamlet's father was strong, physically, at least." Yet, he let Gertrude slip away to Claudius, before, it would seem, the poisoning in the orchard. Perhaps she sought something in Claudius that the "macho" Hamlet Sr. did not provide. Claudius, as
characterized, is far more sensitive and loving than either Hamlet or critics of the play tend to suggest. One is further tempted to argue that part of Hamlet's problem may be his effort to emulate his externally powerful father. Young Hamlet, however, is of a different generation and a different culture—a renaissance prince, not a feudal strong-man. His father, for example, is not described as a patron of the "tragedians of the city" (II.ii.329). One might ask, furthermore, whether one can kill a brother who plans to murder you. Perhaps you can, if you are king and privy to the plan. While death is, among other things, a kind of castration, I do not believe that the pouring of poison in the ear is symbolic of castration—unless, in the Freudian sense, it signals the destruction of the female organs of reproduction. If castration, it did not occur at midnight. The Ghost himself explains the reasons for his nocturnality. Still, however, the son of a physically powerful father can have his problems. We notice, however, that Prince Hamlet proves more than a match at rapier and dagger for the seemingly matchless Laertes. I suggest that Erlich's point is relevant, even if an already ambiguous text submerges under the weight of his thesis. The point, however, is paradoxical: Hamlet cannot discover what is "masculine" in him, unless he accepts the "feminine" in him. Since he cannot, any search for an external masculine role model can only plunge him into the self-laceration we witness.

Yet another neo-Freudian approach is that of P. J. Aldus, in Mousetrap: Structure and Meaning in 'Hamlet'. Aldus argues that the "Mousetrap" is really aimed at Gertrude, not at Hamlet's defined target, Claudius. "Who is the mouse?" Aldus asks. "Surely not the King. Hamlet calls him goat-like, satyr, adulterate beast, paddock, bat, gib, ape, but he is no mouse. Again we remember the opening challenge to the wrong person. In the mousetrap, it is to the queen." The opening challenge (Who's there?) is delivered by the wrong person, by Bernardo, who is approaching the sentinel-on-duty, Francisco. And, while we might agree that Claudius is no mouse and does call Gertrude "his mouse" (III.iv.190), as Hamlet constructs their love-scenes, Hamlet calls the figure behind the arras "a rat" (III.iv.25). Of course, a rat can copulate with a mouse, but farewell the animal analogies. Suffice it that Hamlet does confuse himself about the trap he sets ostensibly for Claudius.

Aldus would, by indirections, find directions out. And he is right: the play-within is at least partially an attack on Gertrude, who is herself sensitive to Baptista's over-protestations. The play-within-the-play is obviously an attack on women and their meaningless vows, and might have continued that attack had Lucianus been permitted to woo Baptista. To narrow "Gonzago" down to a single vector, as Aldus does, however, is to over-simplify a moment of remarkable complexity.

Aldus suggests of the Closet Scene that, "In simple terms Hamlet desires the Queen agonizingly, but will substitute words that are sexual attack even as they excoriate the act." Yes, that beautifully phrased sentence captures the ambivalent fascination of Hamlet's "Not this, by no means, that I bid you do . . ." (III.iv.188ff.). Aldus, predictably, adduces the line, "I will speak daggers to her, but use none" as a phallic prop to his position.

Aldus, then, isolates the Oedipus complex in Hamlet's response to Gertrude. Erlich discovers it in Hamlet's unconscious response to his "absent father." Each offers a working out of and a corrective to the Jones thesis, but each merely validates a more comprehensive original, which, regardless of its crudities, does account for the complex interactions of father-son-mother-uncle, and, to some extent, for the conflations of father-son-uncle, mother-Ophelia, and Lucianus-son-father-uncle. That those conflations confuse me is true, but if drama is a "dream of passion" (II.ii.552), then both dreams and drama do the same thing. They confuse us insofar as we lack a comprehensive definitional frame.

A thesis that might, mutatis mutandis, combine the views of Erlich and Aldus is that of Peter Loewenberg. In examining the rise of the Hitler Youth in the 1930s, Loewenberg suggests that German boys of the WW I years experienced the absence of fathers in war and, if they returned, their return in defeat and ineffectuality. These boys also experienced the humiliation and exile of a "father figure," Kaiser Wilhelm. Thus, after the failures of Weimar, Hitler represented a powerfully magnetic "father figure" for cohorts coming to young manhood in the early 1930s. As boys, these young men had also, often, experienced the absence of mothers.
who worked in war plants and had little time or energy left for cooking what food there was, cleaning, or
nurturing. Hitler also played, as Harold Lasswell noted in 1933, "a maternal role for certain classes in German
society." National Socialism, Lasswell suggested, was "essentially the bundle of 'don'ts' of the nursemaid
conscience."29 Hitler, Erikson argues, "was a ruthless exploiter of parental failures."30

It follows, then, that while Hamlet consciously excoriates Gertrude for what he perceives as her vivid
infidelity, he represses his sense of his father's failures. While the defection of Hamlet's parents would seem to
occur later in his life than did the similar deprivation in the lives of the German cohorts, we remember that
King Hamlet was off at war on the day his son was born, that is, if we believe the First Gravedigger: "I came
to't that day that our last king Hamlet overcame Fortinbras . . . It was that very day that young Hamlet was
born" (V.i. 143-147). Loewenberg suggests that "parental deprivation in childhood . . . assumes increasing
importance in later years as the child approaches and works through the oedipal conflict [and] has a profound
impact on the personality and ideas of youth concerning father images, political authority, and sources of
power."31 It may follow that Hamlet's repression of his hatred of his father—a repression that would fix him at
the adolescent oedipal stage—suggests why he, in contrast to Laertes and Fortinbras, is strangely apolitical.

If we make the large and questionable assumption of "Hamlet's absent father," it follows, according to George
R. Bach, that "the mother may modify the child's personality development in the period of father-absence. The
father is not available for imitation of or identification with masculine social behavior, and there is now more
opportunity to imitate feminine attitudes and manners, and values of the mother."32 In Hamlet's case,
however, the mother is Gertrude. Hamlet's rage at her betrayal of his father—and of him—and his definition
of all that is feminine as "fraility" drives him into stereotypic feminine behavior for which he berates himself.
His self-hatred emerges partly from the masculine ideal he holds up to himself and from his misunderstanding
of how that ideal distorts his perceptions of his own psyche. As Loewenberg argues, "the absent father is
idealized as a defense against hatred toward the father by replacing those repressed hostile feelings with
their conscious opposite."33 The psychodynamics of Hamlet's family, then, have left him helpless between the
destructive crossfires of the oedipal conflict.

A betrayal by both mother and father—the latter repressed in Hamlet's case—might drive a son towards the
embrace of "negative value systems," where inner rage would be projected upon a scapegoat (Jew or
Claudius) and where that rage would find its outlet in a negative code of behavior—Hitler Youth or the
lextalionis, which for Hamlet becomes "a soul for a soul." Loewenberg argues that, for Germany, the effort to
escape the past brought only its more devastating recapitulation: "What [the German youth] created was a
repetition of their own childhoods. They gave to their children and to Europe in greater measure precisely the
traumas they had suffered as children and adolescents a quarter of a century earlier."34 The pattern repeats in
Hamlet as well, but "with a difference." King Hamlet overcame Old Fortinbras on the day Hamlet was born.
On the day he dies, young Hamlet, who has failed to resolve the issues that resided in him and in Elsinore,
allows Young Fortinbras to become King of Denmark without drawing a sword.

The Freudians, we notice—assuming I have interpreted them fairly—do tend to remove Hamlet from the
social context for which Goldstein argues. It is as if the play surrounding Hamlet were somehow a projection
of his psychic imperception—and that is partly true. I suggest, however, that the unmoveable mover,
Shakespeare possessed a more comprehensive view than that of his title character. Nor, of course, would
Freudian critics disagree. Another approach, however may clarify some of the critical—and
dramatic—problems I have outlined thus far. And that brings us to Jung.

III

To begin to apply Jung to Hamlet it is best to examine one of the more superficial layers of the psychic
structure Jung describes—the persona. The persona corresponds to our self-selected image of ourselves; it is
that fictional person we hope that others will accept as the "real us." It is that aspect of the ego, or
"consciousness," that is oriented towards the objective world. We design it to create a specific impression of ourselves and, conversely, to conceal our inner nature from other eyes. Inevitably, that concealment of those energies that we do not want in our "image" leads to repression. Thus is born that threatening personality known as the shadow.

The persona, says Jolande Jacobi, is our "cloak around the ego." It includes three often competing aspects: 1) the "ego ideal," the behavior formed by social and parental conditioning, and by our perception of that conditioning, 2) the environment's view of the individual, particularly of the individual's role or career, a view that is often stereotypic and that thus forces us into stereotypic stances, and 3) the psychic contingencies that limit our ability to fulfill either ego ideal or our environment's vision of us.\(^{35}\) The third factor can be a strength, in that it compensates for and negotiates with the demands of the first two components of the persona. If, however, we base our actions solely on collective demands, we neglect that inner nature to the point where it may activate itself to our inconvenience, as in the so-called "mid-life" crisis experienced either by the career-oriented male or the home-orientated woman. If, however, we insist exclusively on that inner nature, as introverts like Richard II, Brutus, and Hamlet tend to do, we may lose out on external rewards—marriage and career, for example. The persona requires the tension between its components to develop healthily.

While what may have been healthy negotiations become destructive conflict within Hamlet, the concept of persona accounts for the external energies that Goldstein defines. What constitutes correct action for a crown prince of Denmark whose father revisits the glimpses of the moon to demand that his son revenge regicide? The concept of persona accounts for Hamlet's specific response to the Ghost's demand. Hamlet's ego ideal would seem to have evolved—or changed, at least—from his father's military orientation to that of student, patron of the theater, and renaissance gentleman. He is able, even amid his trauma, to remain "in continual practice" (V.ii.209) with his rapier. Swordplay would seem to have developed from the previous generation into aristocratic exercise. Hamlet's ego ideal would seem challenged by the Ghost's demand, which, as Hamlet interprets it, would involve the use of the sword to kill. Hamlet, then, seems to impose upon himself the stereotypic role of revenger. And, regardless of which specific Freudian interpretation we accept, the "inner Hamlet" is troubled by conflicting energies for which he cannot account. In view of his later suggestion about "continual practice," we may not believe all that Hamlet says to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, but Hamlet does, it would seem, define his symptoms accurately: "I have of late, but wherefore I know not, lost all my mirth, foregone all custom of exercises: and indeed it goes so heavily with me that . . . man delights not me, no, nor woman neither . . ." (II.ii.296-310). We know, however, that external events—the sudden death of his father (which, even before the Ghost's narrative, Hamlet suspects was not the work of a random serpent) combined with his mother's "o'erhasty" (II.ii.5-7) marriage to Claudius—have triggered Hamlet's inner reaction. That reaction, however is predicated on what already lay "hidden" in Hamlet's psyche—an unresolved oedipal dilemma perhaps. The question then becomes—is there any action Hamlet could take that would fulfill the demands of the persona, with its seemingly contradictory pull towards personal ideal (renaissance prince), collective expectation (the code of revenge), and inner imperative (which may be the need to resolve the oedipal conflict)? I believe so.

But before I suggest what that action or inaction might have been, I wish to mine a little below the surface of the persona, to suggest who Hamlet is in a Jungian sense.

Jung isolates two basic human orientations—extraversion and introversion. The energy of the extravert is drawn to the object. His "attitude is characterized by the subordination to the demands which the object makes upon him." Even when Claudius, for example, introverts for the moment in his attempt at prayer, his crown, queen, and his own ambition keep his thoughts below, in the extraverted world of power politics, one complicated for him by his love for Gertrude. The psychic energy of the introvert is directed toward the subject. His inner value system is the important criterion. "The introverted attitude is characterized by the subject's assertion of his conscious aims and intentions against the demands of the object."\(^{36}\) That extraverted
Lady Macbeth and introverted Macbeth cannot communicate effectively is a function of their different basic orientations. Macbeth translates his inner arguments into quantitative terms—"Golden opinions" (I.vii.34)—perhaps because Lady Macbeth can understand no other. Macbeth's "wrong reasons," however, open himself up for immediate counterattack and ruthless manipulation. "The introvert," says Jung, "interposes a subjective view between the perception of the object and his own action, which prevents the action from assuming a character that fits the objective situation." Macbeth's hesitation at killing Duncan is akin to Hamlet's over the kneeling Claudius. The "subjective factor" equates to hesitation in the face of any external action that may not square with the character's perception of his inner nature. Action for the introvert must be played out satisfactorily on an inner stage before it can be achieved effectively in the outer world, unless, of course, the introvert behaves in contradiction to his own nature, as the Shakespearean tragic hero tends to do. The tragic hero may believe in what he is doing, as Lear and Othello do. He may believe, as Hamlet does, that "This thing's to do" (IV.iv.44). He may not believe in what he is doing as Macbeth does not. In each case, however, "consciousness" is the criterion, and in each case consciousness dictates the wrong choice. Othello and Lear, at least, are forced to admit as much. Macbeth becomes merely a frantic extravert, admitting all the good things he has lost, not merely "Golden opinions" (I.vi.34), but his "eternal jewel" (III.i.67). Hamlet dies, as Danby suggests, "a baffled young man," never having penetrated to the "heart" of his own inner "mystery." While both Macbeth and Hamlet provide eschatological reasons for their hesitations, Macbeth is right both in his assumptions about the world in which he lives and in his sense of what his killing of Duncan means to that world. Hamlet also lives in a world rounded by a palpable supernature, but he is, typically, incorrect in taking Claudius's stance of prayer for its reality. That is not to say, however, that he should kill Claudius at that point, or that he is consciously rationalizing his delay. The soliloquy convention insists that we believe that Hamlet's wish for Claudius's damnation is Hamlet's "real reason." We can see, however, that Hamlet is indeed interposing a subjective view between his perception of the object and his own action which prevents the action from assuming a character that fits the objective situation—as Hamlet interprets it. The Freudian, of course, would attribute the subjective interposition to the oedipal problem.

To the primary orientations of extraversion and introversion, Jung adds four functions: the evaluative functions of thinking and feeling, and the perceptive functions of intuition and sensation. Each function inheres in human beings, of course. Sensation tells us "that something is." Thinking "tells us what a thing is." Feeling "implies an evaluation." Intuition is "perception of the possibilities inherent in an object" (Jung's ital.)

One function dominates in each person. This "superior function is always an expression of the conscious personality, of its aims, will, and general performance." The conscious function, then, suggests how the libido—or psychic energy—of the persona is directed. In spite of an individual's self-conscious "image-making," however—and because of it—he remains unaware of the compensatory and often explosive power of subordinate functions, "opposed to the conscious aims, even producing effects whose cause is a complete enigma to the individual." Such enigmatic effects can overwhelm the extravert, who overlooks the possibility of an inner life. Richard III, Henry V, Lear, and Lady Macbeth are examples at various extremes of what can happen to the extravert. Subjective factors can also engulf the introvert, who tends to overlook external determinants and to allow his often inappropriate subjectivity to emerge unbidden and against his conscious will. For all of his awareness of an inner life, the introvert is often a poor interpreter of its meaning.

Jung's typology allows us not merely to define the phenomenology of characterization—that is conscious attitude and its unconscious opposite—but also to grasp the way the plays work as interactions between characters: i.e. the introverted Macbeth vs. the extraverted Lady Macbeth. If Hamlet represents introverted thinking and Gertrude extraverted feeling, we have a way of understanding the relationship between son and mother than can incorporate psychoanalytic theory without having to define a specific "reason" for the mystery of Hamlet's character. It helps, I believe, to view Gertrude not merely as "mother," but also as a psychological type precisely opposite to Hamlet's type. In a sense Hamlet demands of Gertrude—why do you not evaluate things as I do? The answer is that Hamlet is a thinking type. "About, my brains!" (II.i.588) he
demands of himself. And, "there is nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it so" (II.ii.249-250). And, of course, he is an introvert who would not understand the extraverted ease with which Gertrude slid from one husband to another and thus remained Queen. Hamlet does, of course, force a moment of painful introversion upon Gertrude:

Thou turn'st mine eyes into my very soul,
And there I see such black and grained spots
As will not leave their tinct.

(III.ii.91-93).

IV

I do not wish to deny the possibility that the oedipal problem accounts for Hamlet's behavior and for part of our response to his characterization. I suggest, however, that the oedipal problem may itself be symptomatic of a deeper disturbance within Hamlet's psyche, that is, his inability to contact his "feminine soul," or anima. The anima is the energy whereby the male recognizes and integrates into consciousness his androgynous nature. The introverted thinker is particularly susceptible to alienation from his androgynous nature. It follows that he is likely to be alienated from his specific mother, and to be "distanced" at least from the father who loved that mother. Here, I am emphasizing not merely the physical act of sexuality, but the emotional energies that flow into the act—the act that produced Hamlet, for example. In describing the conscious attitude of the introverted thinking type, Jung might be drawing a sketch of Hamlet, one that fills in Coleridge's perception that "Hamlet's character is the prevalence of the abstracting and generalizing habit over the particular":

Whether introverted thinking is concerned with concrete or with abstract objects, always at the decisive points it is oriented by subjective data. It does not lead from concrete experience back again to the object, but always back to the subjective content, [i.e. "The time is out of joint./O cursed spite, That ever I was born to set it right" (I.v.189-190), "How all occasions do inform against me" (IV.iv.32), and Hamlet's dying insistence that his story be told—the impossible task he assigns Horatio]. External facts are not the aim and origin of his thinking, though the introvert would often like to make his thinking appear so. It begins with the subject and leads back to the subject, far though it may range into the realm of actual reality. With regard to the establishment of new facts [such thinking] is only indirectly of value, since new views rather than knowledge of new facts are its main concern. It formulates questions and creates theories, it opens up new prospects and insights, but with regard to facts its attitude is one of reserve... facts are collected as evidence for a theory, never for their own sake.42

I suggest that Hamlet's "about my brains" (II.ii.588) and the elaborate strategy whereby Hamlet will at once validate the Ghost's "word" and "capture" Claudius's "conscience" (II.ii.606) reflect Hamlet's reserve in the face of facts, facts that his "prophetic soul" (I.v.41) glimpses even before the Ghost unfolds his tale. One of the reasons that the play unfolds as it does is that Hamlet must devise a method whereby to test theories he has spun out within his brain since his immediate acceptance of the Ghost as "honest." He seems constantly to require "grounds more relative" (II.ii.605) than what he had previously accepted as facts confirmed by his "prophetic soul." While "more relative" means "more pertinent," the word also suggests that Hamlet is, like the introverted thinker Jung describes, falling back into an infinite regress of "relativity." To send the mere "brain" about is to await an incomplete answer. It may be that Hamlet's play is compromised-in-advance by his perception that it is wholly "rational." Hamlet's plan for "Gonzago" emerges from introverted thinking, as Jung describes the type:
[Introverted thinking] wants to reach reality to see how the external fact will fit into and fill the framework of the idea . . . the creative power of this thinking shows itself when it actually creates an idea which, though not inherent in the concrete fact, is yet the most suitable abstract expression of it.  

Thus—drama as imitation of an action, a mimesis Hamlet appreciates. The players are "the abstract and brief chronicles of the time" (II.ii.523-524) who will play, says Hamlet "something like the murder of my father / Before mine uncle" (II.ii.569-597). While the Freudian formulation may illuminate Hamlet's creation of a fictional alter ego in Lucianus, the play-within itself can be viewed as an inevitable product of Hamlet's habit of mind, one that creates abstractions of reality that imitate concreteness but are themselves merely "a fiction . . . a dream of passion" (II.ii.552). That a mimesis can activate psychic reality into being is an idea Hamlet expresses but ignores, until his production has its way with him. I shall argue that, in designing "Gonzago," Hamlet has done much more than to create the most suitable abstract expression of a thought. He has, potentially, opened a fictional doorway that leads out of appearance and into "reality." "Gonzago," however, accomplishes merely a return, for Hamlet and his world, to fictions and facades.

Jung's further description of the introverted thinker captures other aspects of Hamlet's character and behavior: "He will follow his ideas like the extravert, but in the reverse direction: inwards and not outward. Intensity is his aim, not extensivity." Or—as Hamlet says—"O God! I could be bounded in a nutshell and count myself king of infinite space; were it not that I have bad dreams" (II.ii.255-256). "Although [the introverted thinker] will shrink from no danger in building up his world of ideas," Jung says, even if those ideas "might prove to be dangerous, subversive, heretical or wounding to other people's feelings, he is none the less beset by the greatest anxiety if ever he has to make [his ideas] an objective reality." It is precisely that fear of fact as opposed to idea that contributes to Hamlet's destruction of his single opportunity to save Denmark and himself from the corpse-strewn "field" (V.ii.404) of the final scene. That moment occurs because Hamlet has viewed his play-within only in relationship to his need to "prove" the Ghost's honesty. His placing of a narrow hypothesis against the "abstraction" of drama denies him the vision that might allow him to achieve a solution to the problems that unfold even as he thinks about them, and because he can only think about them. As the introverted thinker hollows out his own capacity to do anything but think, he potentializes the energy of his repressed function, which is feeling. Hamlet, afraid of confronting the concrete fact, will be undercut by the data of his own emotions, which, although not concrete, are nonetheless, just as "real." The reality that Hamlet invites by narrowing a perspective that might have opened out to a saving inclusiveness is that of his own psyche, which itself incorporates much more than mere "thinking makes." The introverted thinker, Jung suggests, "begins to confuse his subjective truth with his own personality [i.e. 'Seems, Madam! Nay it is. I know not "seems";I.ii.76]. He will burst out with vicious, personal retorts against every criticism, however just ['Why man, they did make love to this employment. / They are not near my conscience':V.ii. 57-58]. Thus, his isolation gradually increases. His original fertilizing ideas become destructive, poisoned by the seeds of bitterness. His struggle against the influences emanating from the unconscious increases with his external isolation, until finally they begin to cripple him. He thinks his withdrawal into ever-increasing solitude will protect him from the unconscious influences, but as a rule it only plunges him deeper into the conflict that is destroying him from within." Among the defense mechanisms Jung attributes to this type, if a male, is a "vague fear of the feminine sex." Hamlet's fear of women is vague—however projected vehemently into general excoriation—because he has no effective contact with the woman-in-him. Even the most realized of androgynous natures might fear a specific woman—a Tamora or Cymbeline's Queen—but the unintegrated male psyche can only condemn a stereotypic totality.

If the introverted thinker tends by predisposition to fear women, his tendency might be a precondition for the constellation of an Oedipus complex. In Hamlet, the problem might be a symptom, activated by a specific Gertrude, of a deeper psychic disjunction. If so, as helpful as the oedipal theory may be in explaining Hamlet's behavior, it remains a manifestation of the "personal unconscious," which is the sum of unperceived or repressed personal experience. Personal experience, obviously, is conditioned by and is a function of psychic
typology. Beneath both the personal unconscious and the conscious orientation of the psyche that dictates the
contents of the personal unconscious lies the collective unconscious. Among the archetypes of the collective
unconscious, in the male, is the anima, the energy of the male's significant and powerful female minority. If
unintegrated, the anima can become "minority rule."

V

The "anima," according to Aniela Jaffe is the "personification of the feminine nature of man's unconscious . . .
This psychological bisexuality is a reflection of the biological fact that it is the larger number of male (or
female) genes which is the decisive factor in the determination of sex. The smaller number of contrasexual
genes seems to produce a corresponding contrasexual character, which usually remains unconscious."48 One
might add that the coding that creates a male foetus does not occur until some months into the process of
gestation, meaning that no matter what a patriarchally motivated Book of Genesis may suggest, the female is
a priori, as principal and as principle. Uncannily, Shakespeare describes the process in Sonnet 20. Jung's
description of anima, is, predictably, less biological: "Every man carries within him the eternal image of
woman, not the image of this or that particular woman, but a definitive feminine image. This image is
fundamentally unconscious, an hereditary factor of primordial origin engraved in the living organic system of
the man, an imprint or 'archetype' of all the ancestral experiences of the female, a deposit, as it were, of all the
impressions ever made by woman . . . Since this image is unconscious, it is always unconsciously projected
upon the person of the beloved, and is one of the chief reasons for passionate attraction or aversion."39 While
our birth, if we are males, may be a "dream and a forgetting," it would seem that we bring with us into the
world not an unconscious image of the women from whom we have been born but of the woman we were
biologically only months before. Our male lives, then, involve the search, almost invariably unconscious, for
that which we were and for that which our consciousness and our physiology denies we ever were or could be.
The "male ego" does all that it can, of course, to deny the feminine component of his psyche, thus must
project his own feminine upon his biological mother, and thus may become trapped within the oedipal
dilemma.

Suffice it that Hamlet is alienated from his anima. In discussing the upcoming duel with Laertes, Hamlet says:
"I shall win at the odds; but thou wouldst not think how ill all's here about my heart—but it is no matter . . . It
is but foolery, but it is such a kind of gain-giving as would perhaps trouble a woman" (V.ii.210-214).
Obviously, Hamlet has a deep and negative feeling about the duel, a misgiving that springs from his inmost
heart. Even as he relegates such "foolery" to a womanish fear, however, he sneers at the woman-within who
would warn him, at an augury emerging from his own repressed anima.

The man alienated from the positive energy of his anima will "forget himself," that is, fall victim to the "I
don't know what came over me" syndrome, as Hamlet does when he discovers that the woman he loved
"once" (III.i.116) is dead. He then exaggerates his "love" to a "sum" larger than that of "forty thousand
brothers" (V.i.269-271), but later regrets his wild hyperbole: "But I am very sorry, good Horatio,/That to
Laertes I forgot myself (V.ii.76-77). He may, Jung suggests, find himself acting "in a very womanish way"50
when repressed feeling leaps out to contradict male "rationality" radically. Such a man, says Edward
Whitmont, will exhibit "all sorts of compulsive moodiness, sentimentality, depression, brooding, withdrawal,
fits of passion, morbid oversensitivity or effeminacy—namely emotional and behavior patterns that cause
[him] to act like an inferior woman"51—inferior because the man alienated from his own feminine principle
can only react from his stereotypic version of woman. While Whitmont defines several of the "sub-texts" that
have informed actors depicting Hamlet, Hamlet himself is aware of precisely the behavior Whitmont and Jung
ascribe to the "anima-alienated" male:

This is most brave,
That I, the son of a dear father murdered,
Prompted to my revenge by heaven and hell,
Must like a whore unpack my heart with words,
And fall a-cursing like a very drab,
A stallion.

(II.ii.583-588).

Aware of the manifestations, Hamlet cannot penetrate to their source.

Hamlet's "problem", then, is deeper than his mere relationship with Gertrude. When the archetype of the anima is not integrated into consciousness, its energy emerges as projection, pouring out as impulsive activity conditioned only by personal experience, that is, as a manifestation of that shallowly concealed alter ego Jung calls the shadow. Hamlet's inability to integrate his feminine energy into his consciousness and thus to respond effectively to his specific mother causes him to project negative feminine qualities onto Ophelia, in the nunnery and play scenes, and, as Whitmont indicates, provides a rationale for Hamlet's often bizarre actions—at Ophelia's funeral, for example. Such "reflex-like irruptions of the anima," Whitmont says, "come from the area of inferior function [which, in Hamlet's case, is feeling]. The instinctual and intuitive-emotional response is what the male is usually least capable of providing consciously." Since Hamlet does behave compulsively, even pauses to praise the principle of "rashness," in a rationalization typical of the introverted thinker, we can accept Grebanier's description of "rash Hamlet."

But Grebanier is among those critics who elevate a half-truth to the "whole truth," however corrective the process may be to other fractional versions of Hamlet's character. How do we account for the Hamlet with whom Coleridge claims a kinship—the troubled intellectual, the withdrawn philosopher? Does the Jungian thesis account for the obvious inconsistencies in Hamlet's behavior while at the same time providing a consistent theory of characterization? Marie-Louise von Franz describes the activity of the "negative anima," that is, the archetype's ability to create behavioral patterns. In doing so, she also describes the introverted thinking type: "The anima in this guise involves men in a destructive intellectual game. We can notice the effect of this anima trick in all those neurotic pseudo-intellectual dialogues that inhibit a man from getting into direct touch with life and its real decisions. He reflects about life so much that he cannot live it and loses all his spontaneity and outgoing feelings . . . Within the soul of such a man the negative anima will endlessly repeat this theme: nothing. Nothing makes any sense. With others it's different, but for me . . . I enjoy nothing." The "moods" of men, even depression and deep melancholy, can be attributed to their divorce from the feminine-in-them, the principle that fertilizes the male ego.

While one must account for the powerful forces working on Hamlet as the play begins, his response is his response, and his efforts at resolving the problems he faces—for himself and for Denmark—emerge from his psyche, and no other. A theory that accounts for his conscious orientation and for its inevitably opposite unconscious activity, which can be positive if integrated, negative if repressed, permits us to accommodate erratic patterns of behavior, even to incorporate the oedipal dilemma, within a comprehensive description of character.

VI

The play, however, is that context within which theory either succeeds or fails.

A particularly brilliant moment in the recent BBC-TV production occurred when Derek Jacobi borrowed a skull-mask from the actors as an emblem of his "idleness" before the Mousetrap. "How fares . . .—our Cousin Hamlet" (III.ii.91), Claudius inquired with sour amusement, recognizing a kinship, perhaps even an alter ego in Hamlet's antic mask. Hamlet could almost have said, "Not where he eats, but where'/a is eaten!"

(IV.iii.19)g. The skull-mask nicely anticipated the graveyard of Act V, and reminded us that, among other roles, Hamlet plays that of jester in Elsinore, the role vacated by Yorick some 23 years earlier. The court of
Claudius is characterized accurately by Michael Long as "manipulative, expeditious and politic, a matter of espionage and the political use of man by man against man," a place that holds "psychic energy [in] contempt." In a Jungian sense, such a situation demands a compensatory response. Some of Hamlet's energy must flow towards the role of "fool," "foil" (V.ii.253), or Jungian shadow. In that role, Hamlet can show the court its unperceived and repressed inner nature, can hold the mirror up to the form and pressure of a psychic context that Claudius and his court would ignore as it floats along on the superficial surfaces of political "success." That is not to say that Hamlet is not, at times, his own jester. In a marvelous moment in the 1979 Theater at Monmouth Hamlet, Sam Tsousouvas also borrowed a prop from the players—a mirror. He was looking at himself when he said "virtue her own feature," then sneered and put the mirror aside as he said "scorn her own image" (III.ii.22-23). He was sneering at himself, of course, dismissing a feminine virtue with, as he perceived it, the more powerful feminine icon of scorn. Each, however, was an image of his own character, and each suggested the conflict emerging from the feminine within him, which "cannot come to good" (I.ii.158) if his tendency towards introverted thinking does not surrender to the saving energy of the anima which the introverted thinker represses so forcefully.

Claudius, of course, can afford no jester. Yet it is precisely the intention of the play-within to ignite a truth within the King, and to force him—even against his extraverted will—to express that truth openly. Beneath the extraverted thinker lies the repressed function of feeling, which will leap out, not as in Hamlet, in a sudden flash of manic energy, but in an expression of the truth of one's nature. That truth, if encouraged into being, takes precedence over conscious intention, and expresses as Claudius does, issues more ultimate and eschatological than mere kingship. Some might agree with G.R. Hibbard's claim that "the Prayer scene... reveals unequivocally that repentance and the giving-up of the crown are actions of which the King is incapable." What the scene demonstrates, I believe, is that extraverted thinking has had a chance to reestablish itself within Claudius, even as other imperatives struggle to free themselves within him. Goldstein is only partially correct to suggest that "if not for the play-within-the-play, why should Claudius's conscience, which has been quiet until the prayer scene, suddenly start to torment him?" Goldstein isolates the potential power of the play-within, a potentiality squandered in Claudius's anti-cathartic effort at prayer, but Goldstein ignores Shakespeare's characterization of Claudius. The conscience of the King has been aroused before the performance of "Gonzago" by the sententiousness of a mere Polonius:

Polonius: 'Tis too much prov'd—that with devotion's visage
And pious action, we do sugar o'er the devil himself.
Claudius: (Aside) O, 'tis too true!
How smart a lash that speech doth give my conscience!
The harlot's cheek, beautied with plast'ring art,
Is not more ugly to the thing that helps it,
Than is my deed to my most painted word.
O heavy burden!

(III.i.47-55).

Claudius seems "fit and season'd" for a "passage" (III.iii.86) other than that which Hamlet would arrange as he puts up his sword behind the kneeling King.

Hamlet may be a jester to the court of Claudius. But the jester, or fool, speaks truths unavailable to a king's consciousness. He is, then, like Lear's Fool, a kind of conscience. What happens to Hamlet is that he speaks from his unconsciousness during the performance of "Gonzago" and thus allows the conscience of the king to be caught only in its self-laceration. Hamlet mousetraps Claudius, but is himself an equal victim, perhaps a greater victim of the trap he has set. Hamlet ignores the deeper spring from which his plan for the play-within has come.
The skull-mask Jacobi employed linked his play-within-the-play with ancient drama, with the Greek drama which reported terrible off-stage events via breathless messengers—Sophocles's *Oedipus* and Euripides's *Medea*, for example, and the lengthy report about Priam and Hecuba in the Player's Speech. That is the drama Hamlet the perennial graduate student prefers, as Marchette Chute suggests in an incisive passage from *Shakespeare of London*:

Hamlet ['s] idea of true theater was to hear the sorrows of the characters described at second hand in dignified and interminable blank verse . . . The proper thing to do was to describe [Hecuba] from afar . . . The play from which Hamlet quotes so admiringly represents the best practices of university stagecraft, with Hecuba's agony filtered through Senecan blank verse.58

The preference of the introverted thinker for experience "second hand" is reflected even in Hamlet's theatrical tastes. While "Gonzago" is of a different subgenre than is the Player's speech, it is an old play, formulated of sententious couplets, frozen firmly within its melodramatic premises, and conducted within the "unities" of time, place, and action. "Gonzago" stands as anti-type to the sprawl of the play surrounding it. The outer play represents the "reality" in which Prince Hamlet lives. Indeed, he seems to be a character in a play of which he would disapprove. He would seek "reality" via a fiction, through an end-stopped drama whose lines—except for his "dozen of sixteen" (II.ii.541)—have already been written. The irony is that fiction can be an avenue towards reality, as Shakespeare has shown in Rosalind's disguise, for example. The tragic irony is that Hamlet, so conversant with the trappings and shows of drama, does not grasp its potentiality. Or—if he does—his unperceived psyche cancels his conscious insight.

The inner play, for all of its antique formality, has the power to translate the outer play into something other than tragedy. As Hamlet's psychic energy explodes to destroy "Gonzago," he coaxes his own play towards tragedy. That play, too, is a fiction, but Hamlet has an opportunity to allow the fiction he commissions to become a profound truth for the world he inhabits. If we look through "Gonzago" and extend the glimpse Claudius has already given of himself, we discern, in what might seem to be a tiny mirror at the end of an infinite regress, a reflection of a universe—that is the microcosm known as the soul.

I suggest of Hamlet what I suggested of those critics who would be "objective" about a drama, about this play and its title character. The "detached" stance, based on a set of derived "rules," merely encourages unperceived energies to flow forward. It is what happens to those of us introverted thinking type professors, when a class suddenly and unaccountably goes awry. Hamlet, the intellectual critic of theater, cannot accept his own standards. His own feeling explodes through his own too-rational plan, which has expressed the possibility of feeling, but is translated only into a rationality that becomes a tragic rationalization.

Hamlet merges with Lucianus, a case of alter ego inundating consciousness and becomes a character of whom he would disapprove in a bloody revenge play, in which only the relatively peaceful drowning of Ophelia and the presumed execution of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are delivered by report. The Jungian shadow, the unconscious personality formed by consciousness, leaps forward to evoke in Hamlet a fantasy of murdering Claudius "on the psychic plane," as Harold Goddard suggests.59 That the fantasy of poisoning Claudius in the play-within becomes a double reality in the outer play confirms the moment of Hamlet's tragic "decision"—a decision made for him within a matrix of conflict that he could not control. Hamlet is the subject of a profound satire. He may prefer drama that is "caviary to the general" (II.ii.436-437) but his selection of the only script available to depict "something like the murder of [his] father" (I.ii.596) may signal a surrender of his own aesthetic system of values. It is his psyche, however, that caves in before his own melodrama, a surrender that suggests his own shallow sense of his original conception of what even melodrama might accomplish and his superficial grasp of who he is, as opposed to what his ego conceives him to be. The ego mis-conceives because it ignores the deeper conceptions and energies that lurk beneath our soap-opera daily lives. Hamlet's inability to abide by his old-fashioned rules, both in choice of play and in attitude of spectator,
is one factor that makes *Hamlet* the play a masterpiece of the new drama, with, as Chute says, "its mixture of comedy and tragedy, its failure to observe the unities, and all its other sins against decorum that any young gentleman from the universities would have noted immediately."  

The melodramatic "Gonzago," however, offered a kind of "comedy" to the soul of Claudius and a redemption for the world of Elsinore. Hamlet had to glimpse that possibility—as he did—and cling to it—as he did not. His smashing of the melodrama forces the "other play," the reality in which Hamlet lives, into the tragic mode. The play is Shakespeare's, of course, not Hamlet's, although the inner play is, in a sense, Hamlet's. (I do not believe that we ever hear "the speech" [III.ii.1]—Hamlet's insertion). Hamlet's "misinterpretation" of his own play allows "Gonzago" to draw Hamlet's psyche out destructively. He fails the decorum of even the melodrama of which he himself is the impresario. The play does capture Claudius's inner nature—later and too late. It captures Hamlet's sooner—and too soon. Once it has done so, it is too late for almost all of "Gonzago's" immediate spectators. Hamlet coerces not Claudius's confession, but his own.

The play-within represents a potential solution to the seemingly insolvable issues with which Hamlet has been wrestling. It is, at least, worth trying, is consistent with the various facets of Hamlet's persona, represents his control, at last, of the enigmatic energies of appearance and reality, and is a potential manifestation of Hamlet's creative soul, or anima, not just a product of his "brain." In all the play, it is his only "considered" action:

> I have heard  
> That guilty creatures, sitting at a play,  
> Have by the very cunning of the scene  
> Been struck so to the soul, that presently  
> They have proclaim'd their malefactions;  
> For murder, although it hath no tongue, will speak  
> With most miraculous organ.  

(II.ii.589-595).

Hamlet articulates the plan clearly, and expresses its ultra-rational possibilities—in "soul" and "miraculous." He further suggests that his "guilty creature" may "proclaim presently"—that is express guilt both publicly and immediately. This product of the "brain" seems to have transcended its biological and merely mental premises. While his own conception of drama does not encompass the complexity of the play in which he himself is captured, he might absorb a lesson from the First Player about "the realities of drama":

> O, what a rogue and peasant slave am I!  
> Is it not monstrous that this player here,  
> But in a fiction, in a dream of passion,  
> Could force his soul so to his own conceit  
> That from her working all his visage wanned,  
> Tears in his eyes, distraction in his aspect,  
> A broken voice, and his whole function suiting  
> With forms to his conceit; and all for nothing  
> For Hecuba!  
> What's Hecuba to him, or he to Hecuba,  
> That he should weep for her?  

(II.ii.549-560).
Even here, Hamlet describes the male soul as feminine (that is, assuming that "from her working" refers back to "his soul"). But here we have a male weeping for a woman, a male evoking a subtext of a compassion that Hamlet, perhaps remembering a Gertrude "like Niobe, all tears" (I.ii.149), can find only baffling, if not hypocritical. In the Player, sub-text became a "reality" that convinced his auditors. Hamlet might draw three conclusions—might, if not swept into one of his outbursts of passionate feeling: a) revenge, as it is represented by Pyrrhus is a "hellish" activity; b) a fictional version of Claudius's crime, although perhaps the fiction of a Ghost, might force Claudius's soul to reveal its subtextual energy—the Player, after all, has moved from inside out on the basis of a remote fiction; and c) Hamlet had better not let his own soul be moved by his own conceit, as he observes his play, lest his own subtextual energies unkennel themselves to destroy his melodramatic masterpiece. Such a three-part formulation might seem the product of a scholar sitting in his study. So it is. If, however, we listen to Hamlet as he discusses guilty creatures sitting at plays or actors playing roles, and if we remember Hamlet's injunction about staying in one's role ("let those who play your clowns speak no more than is set down for them"):III.ii.38-39)—even if that role be defined as that of spectator—we might recognize that Hamlet has expressed these possibilities and more. It is the tendency of the introverted thinker, however, to blast apart even those well-laid plans he has "thought" out in advance. The psychic moment is always charged with an energy that the thinking type cannot have "thought" about. In Hamlet's case, that energy emerges from his repressed anima. The incomplete conclusions Hamlet draws from the Player's response to Hecuba are a product of Hecuba's mourning for her dead king. Hamlet knows what "bisson rheum" (II.ii.506) is worth! A Player responding to the likes of Hecuba can only be "monstrous" (II.ii.551), because even passionate mourning can only be temporary and becomes, finally, less meaningful than the actions of "a beast that wants discourse of reason" (I.ii.150). While Hamlet may project his mother's example onto "all occasions" his inability to respond to any positive feminine action signals not just the contamination of his "personal unconscious" by personal experience, as in the case of the oedipal dilemma, but his alienation from the feminine principle within him, a psychic divorce that may dictate the negative working out of the oedipal problem.

The man controlled by the negative anima inevitably responds to women on the specific level of his perception of his specific mother. Such a man cannot penetrate to the deeper level of his own maternal being, to the a priori principle that precedes mere biology. Mere biology becomes, then, one of Hamlet's chief preoccupations when it comes to the two women in his life. It would seem that Hamlet wished to come to Hecuba so that he could believe in her, at least, but that the Player's "belief interrupts the potentiality for Hamlet's contact with a compensatory example of woman. So, too, do Ophelia's contrived "orisons" (III.i.90), whether Hamlet perceives the "lawful espials" (III.i.32) or not. He may, but it does not matter. The perverse and often moving love scene devolves into a brutal rejection of Ophelia by a Hamlet who, like so many would-be lovers, rejects his own hopes in the process. His affections may not "that way tend" (III.i.165) but the words and actions of the introverted thinker too often contradict the wishes of his nature. For Hamlet, the activity that emerges from the feminine nature of man, whether the Player's mimesis of response to the antique sorrow of Hecuba or Hamlet's intuitive grasp of the meaning of the duel, is bound to be rejected. Hamlet is programmed to scorn the principle of the feminine soul, even as he elsewhere berates his resultant womanish behavior. Whether Ophelia is a "worthy object" of Hamlet's affection is irrelevant. She is the human screen upon which Hamlet's unconscious anima is projected. She must get to a nunnery and become a nun or get to that nunnery which, in Elizabethan slang, was a brothel. The anima-alienated man can see women only as saints—in which case they do not exist as women—or as whores—in which case they also do not exist as women. A woman exists for a man only insofar as he can elevate the feminine principle from the depths of his psyche into consciousness.

The failure of "Gonzago" results partially from Hamlet's projection of his own shadow personality onto the figure of Lucianus, with his "Thoughts black" (III.ii 253). The play may resemble "something like the murder of [Hamlet's] father" (II.ii.596), but it becomes, as Hamlet begins to interact with it, something like the poisoning of Claudius, here on the psychic plane, in Act V, on the level of physical action. In one sense, Hamlet is Claudius poisoning King Hamlet, a mimesis of Hamlet's oedipal fantasy. In another sense Hamlet is
Lucianus killing Claudius, as Hamlet allows his shadow personality to become "nephew to the King" (III.ii.242). It is neither incidental nor accidental that the play-within does resemble the Ghost's description of his demise. What it comes to mean, however, is something else. Rather than eliciting the penitential imperative in Claudius towards open confession, it summons forward Hamlet's own unperceived psychic content. The "murderer" does not "get the love of Gonzago's wife" (III.ii.261-262) because Hamlet has interrupted the "anon" he promises. One could argue, then, that while the death of the father has been achieved, Hamlet must stop short of the possession of the mother by Lucianus. Both the oedipal dilemma and the incest taboo pertain, if we accept the Lucianus-Claudius-Hamlet conflation. If the recumbent "king" is Claudius, however, as it will be in Act V, when Hamlet forces the contents of the chalice down Claudius's throat, then Hamlet is responding to the inner drama of the shadow, responding from a shallow but powerful plane of the personal unconscious. Hamlet may have wished to play this role in Elsinore, with his "nighted color" (I.ii.68), but now the role plays him. In the psychic sense, "it is as easy as lying." Hamlet's confusion before his own production culminates as he breaks up the play, leaving the actors on-stage to gaze at a fleeing audience. Polonius's command is redundant. All Claudius asks for is "some light" (III.ii.267). Hamlet's inflation may term the result a "comedy" (III.ii.291), but his chance to achieve the King's "purgation" (III.ii.305)—and his own—has passed. He is quickly, and again, victimized by discrepancies between appearances and realities.61

Conventional wisdom on "Gonzago" is represented by Ruth Nevo:

The King breaks down; Hamlet has triumphed. He has made the galled jade wince and the truth unkennel itself. It is his text that the players, the court, the King and the Queen all play. He is • master of reality, making his will prevail, no fool of fortune. His elation is unbounded . . .62

His elation, indeed, is unbounded. While we can understand, perhaps, how and why Hamlet feels he has succeeded, here is what has actually happened:

Lucianus On wholesome life usurp immediately. [Pours the poison into the sleeper's ears.]

Hamlet A poisons him i' th' garden for his estate. His name's Gonzago. The story is extant and written in very choice Italian. You shall see anon how the murderer gets the love of Gonzago's wife.

[Claudius rises.]

Ophelia. The King rises.

Hamlet. What, frighted with false fire? Queen. How fares my lord?

Polonius. Give o'er the play.

King. Give me some light. Away! Polonius. Lights, lights, lights!

(III.ii.258-268)

While Horatio may be willing to grant Hamlet "Half a share" (III.ii.277) for the half of "Gonzago" Hamlet has permitted to be performed, I see no evidence here that Claudius has broken down. Alfred Harbage claims that "As the act of poisoning occurs, Claudius rises, crying for lights and rushing out."63 In the superb 1964 Gielgud production, Alfred Drake rose slowly, looked at Hamlet with profound anger, and exited with dignity.
Patrick Stewart smiled at Derek Jacobi’s BBC-TV Hamlet, as if to say, "So you know? You should not have let me know." Tim Wheeler, in the 1983 Monmouth production reached for a courtier's sword on "Give me . . . ", paused, said "some light" (III.ii.267) and strode from the room. I believe that the script shows two things: a) that Hamlet interrupts "Gonzago" for the last time, and b) that only Hamlet believes that Claudius has unkenneled his guilt. Horatio hardly confirms Hamlet's perception. Indeed, as McElroy argues, "Hamlet . . . accepts the Ghost's account and hence should be in no need of proof . . . Hamlet the enthusiast is once more caught up in the game, sanguinely anticipating the outcome: 'The play's the thing . . . ". The play-within proves nothing about Claudius, except to Hamlet and those critics who accept Hamlet's interpretation of "success." That Claudius is guilty turns out to be true. But that Hamlet wastes his precious knowledge is also true. As Granville-Barker says, "it is a barren victory, lacking its conclusive stroke, and to be turned against its victor." In other words, it is a defeat—not of Claudius, but of Prince Hamlet. It is Hamlet who is left on stage to leap about excitedly. I have never seen a production that allowed Claudius to exit in fear or panic. In anger, yes. Claudius does succeed in suggesting to the world of Elsinore that he is angry. Hamlet has convinced no one of what his "prophetic soul" already knew—that Claudius is guilty. Hamlet has forgotten the principle he articulated in his "guilty creatures" speech and becomes the victim of Holland's description of drama:

By projecting what is in the characters outward into externally visible events and actions, a play paves the way for the audience's own act of projection. We find in the external reality of a play what is hidden in ourselves. Drama shows virtue her own feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure. Watching a set of events in a play feels, for this reason, very different from reading them in a novel.

Hamlet's failure can be understood in both the Freudian oedipal and the Jungian shadow contexts. It results more basically, however, from his creation of a work of art—a play—that can function on a level deeper than that of his own conscious understanding, or rationalization, of the way drama can work. "Gonzago" catches Claudius, powerfully but ineffectually. But it shows Hamlet to be the murderer in the garden. He has failed the creative and feminine principle within him that inspired "Gonzago." "The creative process," Jung says, "has feminine quality, and the creative work arises from unconscious depths—we might say, from the realm of the mothers. Whenever the creative force predominates, human life is ruled and moulded by the unconscious as against the active will, and the conscious ego is swept along by a subterranean current, being nothing more than a helpless observer of events. The work in progress becomes the poet's fate." If Hamlet could remain merely an observer, saying "Now, let it work," then his plans for "Gonzago," seemingly fitted precisely to the tortured conscience Claudius has told us is there . . . well, that is another play, true. Hamlet merges with "Gonzago"—"a chorus" (III.ii.243), as Ophelia calls him—until he does prove helpless before the content his production activates in him. "Gonzago" as "success"—as most critics call it? The label may be a product of the critic who has made Hamlet his "moral interpreter," as Robert Ornstein, for example, claims Hamlet is in this play. "Gonzago," I suggest, is hardly a "success," even if Hamlet wildly and whirlingly sees it as one. It is, instead, the play's tragic climax. The premature closing of "Gonzago" drives the outer play towards its negative fatality. The actions immediately after "Gonzago"—often elevated as Hamlet's "climax"—emanate from the potentially positive dynamic Hamlet has shattered. He is summoned to Gertrude's closet, discovers Claudius in the chapel and passes up his chance to kill the kneeling King, arrives in Gertrude's chamber, and kills Polonius. The pattern that includes the sparing of Claudius and the slaying of Polonius and that shows Hamlet again confused about the nature of "reality" emerges directly from the suddenly cancelled performance of "Gonzago." And for all of Hamlet's elation immediately after the Mouse-trap, the pattern hardly argues success. The "other ending" expressed by Hamlet in planning his play is forever unavailable. For Hamlet, now, revenge is not revenge unless the victim's soul can be dispatched to hell, although an incidental murder can be justified because the victim was "too busy" (III.iv.34).

Hamlet's play and its intrinsic failure capture the anima problem profoundly. Claudius's ex post facto invocation to "the sweet heavens" (III.iii.45) and his wish that his heart might become "soft as sinews of the
newborn babe" (III.iii.71) combine with the "heavy burden" (III.ii.55) of guilt he acknowledged before the play-within to suggest that he had it within him to be redeemed—if temporally doomed—by the reenactment of his crime, by a "dream of passion" (II.ii.552) that projected his own "truth"—even if consciousness would call it a "nightmare"—irresistibly before him. The negative anima—Hamlet's "whore" (V.ii.64) or Claudius's "harlot's cheek" (III.i.52)—might have been translated into the energy of salvation. While a specific Queen stands between both Claudius and Hamlet and their deepest self-expression, her power manifests itself only on the "personal" level. Hamlet is guilty of wasting his command of a potent fictional force that might have activated a deeper than personal level within Claudius, that level where the anima resides, with its command over the eternal, the feminine-in-man, and with its ability to mediate, like the Catholic Virgin Mary, between the soul of man and God. At the very least, Hamlet fails to recognize that, as Leslie Fiedler says, the play-within has "an archetypal meaning quite independent of any individual's conscious exploitation of it."69

The play elicits Hamlet's negative psyche; it does not give Claudius's inner imperative a chance to proclaim itself Thus Hamlet becomes a tragic hero acting in defiance of the ground of his own being, a ground inhabited by a feminine principle that expresses itself only to be scorned.

Shakespeare sets Hamlet up as a potential comedy. While we accept, ponder, and celebrate the play he gives us, we must, I believe, recognize that the play deepens into tragedy at the precise moment that Hamlet cancels the possibilities he has set loose in "Gonzago." It may be that Hamlet's production, coming as it does from his deepest creative instincts, is, from the woman-in-him, must be rejected because Hamlet mistrusts that woman. His castigation of women in his outer world argues his hatred of the feminine within.

The Jungian approach allows us to describe Hamlet within the context of a failed androgyny. Such a failure is characteristic of the introverted thinker and can incorporate an oedipal dilemma. The Jungian approach, however, does not force us to reduce dramatic action to the activity of a specific complex in the title character. We can, then, accept the thesis that the complex is there, without coercing the complex into an "explanation" of a character and a play that will always remain seductively mysterious. Whatever he meant and whatever his character may mean as he is exposed to the litmus of our psyches, Shakespeare meant the mystery. Jolande Jacobi, for example, describes a basic human problem that Hamlet would seem to manifest. While the passage I quote would seem to be a response to the Freudian critics I cited earlier, it is in no way a direct response to the character of Prince Hamlet:

Material deriving from the collective unconscious is never "pathological"; it can become pathological only if it comes from the personal unconscious, where it undergoes a specific transformation and coloration by being drawn into an area of individual conflict . . . Only an interpretation on the symbolic level can strip the nucleus of the complex from its pathological covering and free it from the impediment of its personalistic garb . . . If a complex embedded in the material of the personal unconscious seems to stand in inexorable conflict with consciousness, its nucleus, once laid bare, may prove to be a content of the collective unconscious. For example, the individual is no longer confronted with his own mother, but with an archetype of the "maternal," no longer with the unique personal problem created by his own mother as a concrete reality, but with the universally human, impersonal problem of every man's dealings with the primordial maternal ground in himself . . . how much more bearable it is for a son to conceive the son-father problem no longer on the plane of individual guilt—in relation, for example, to his own desire for his father's death, his aggressions and desires for revenge—but as a problem of deliverance from the father, i.e. from a dominant principle of consciousness that is no longer adequate for the son: a problem that concerns all men, and has been disclosed in the myths and fairy tales as the slaying of the reigning old king and the son's accession to the throne . . . Everything depends on whether the conscious mind is capable of understanding, assimilating, and integrating the complex, in order to ward off its harmful effects. If it does not succeed in this, the conscious mind falls victim to the complex, and is to a greater or lesser degree engulfed by it.70
Fortune, for Hamlet, is a "strumpet" (II.ii.236). While Fortune is a goddess no doubt fickle and inconsistent, Hamlet's projection of whorishness upon her signals his view of women, not necessarily Fortune's view of men. But Hamlet predicts what his fortune will be if he clings to his vision of woman—and of the woman-in-him—as strumpet.

The Freudian tends to approach a character as a "real person." The Freudian tends to posit an inevitable and perhaps valid infantile experience that Shakespeare does provide for Juliet, Leontes, and Polixenes perhaps, but not for Hamlet. Jung provides a thesis that coincides with characterization and that suggests that Shakespeare's plays imitate human actions that may emerge from premises deeper than those of personal complexes. Hamlet's tragedy—unique, royal, and superbly phrased—captures within it our own specific struggle towards identity. "Who's there?" (I.i.1) we ask of ourselves, perhaps even pausing for a reply. Hamlet's own reply must give us pause because it—like our own—is inadequate. Hamlet is forced into "the faction that is wronged" (V.ii.236). In so profoundly exploring his own identity—and insignificance—Hamlet helps us to explore our own, perhaps allowing us to transcend, for the moment, our insignificance even as we recognize that Hamlet transcends, even in tragic failure, whatever such as we might be, "crawling between earth and heaven" (III.i.129-130). The Jungian approach helps us account for inconsistencies in behavior—whether in a dramatic character like Hamlet or in ourselves. We may have a smack of Hamlet in us. In his own desperate and losing struggle to discover his identity and in his radical misinterpretation of the basic message of his selfhood, Hamlet makes our own identities possible—the imperative available in a great work of art, even in a lesser work like "Gonzago", which we may accept or reject as we will. Hamlet's conscious effort to exploit even a melodrama like "Gonzago" leads to the drama's sudden exploitation of his unconscious.

Hamlet, "had he been put on," "might have prov'd most royal" (V.ii.399-400). But he trapped himself in an unsuccessful working out of a myth of identity. He has become mythological, of course, but his status as enigma cannot ignore his having proved himself a guilty creature sitting at a play. He exits, "loudly" and ironically, to "soldier's music" (V.ii.401-402). But that is Fortinbras' interpretation. An old regime is born again, where a new one might have reigned. The point was nicely made in the recent RSC Hamlet, when Fortinbras, suddenly remembering that he is king, moved back into center stage and coerced obeisance from the survivors in the throne room.

Notes

3 Coleridge's Writings on Shakespeare, ed. Terence Hawkes (New York: Capricorn, 1959), pp. 139-140.
4 Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship, I. IV. xiii.
7 Murdoch, Black Prince, p. 200.

11 Bradley, pp. 86-87.


14 Bradley, p. 111.

15 Bradley, p. 113.

16 Bradley, p. 84.


19 Goldstein, 77.


21 *The Singularity of Shakespeare, and Other Essays* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), p. 120.


24 Erlich, p. 63.


27 Aldus, p. 166.


31 Loewenberg, p. 264.

32 "Father-Fantasies and Father-Typing in Father-Separated Children," *Child Development* XVI (1946), 71.
33 Loewenberg, p. 264.

34 Loewenberg, pp. 279-280.


36 Campbell, Portable Jung, p. 311. CW XV, par. 114.

37 Campbell, p. 229. CW VI, II, par. 620.


39 Campbell, PF ), 25-26. CW VIII, p. 141

40 Campbell p. 190, CW VI, par. 574.

41 Campbell p. 200. CW VI, par. 588.

42 Campbell p. 237. CW VI, par. 628.

43 Campbell p. 230. CW VI, par. 608.

44 Campbell p. 241. CW VI, par. 640.

45 Campbell p. 242. CW VI, par. 641.

46 Campbell p. 244. CW VI, par. 643.

47 Campbell p. 245. CW VI, par. 644.


49 CW XVII, p. 198. Elsewhere, Jung says, "a larger mind bears the stamp of the feminine: it is endowed with a receptive and fruitful womb which can reshape what is strange and give it a familiar form." Quoted in Marie-Louise von Franz, CG. Jung: His Myth in Our Time (CG. Jung Foundation: G.P. Putnam, 1975), p. 145.

50 CW IX, Part 2, par. 19.

51 Whitmont, Symbolic Quest, p. 194.

52 Whitmont, p. 190.


In the following excerpt, Barber and Wheeler maintain that the psychological pattern in Hamlet involves Hamlet's "struggle to cope with the desecration of his heritage." The critics stress that this turmoil is the social reality which enables the play's psychological constructs to be expressed and which ensures the historical relevancy of Hamlet.

Piety, Outrage, and Theatrical Aggression in Hamlet

A psychological pattern is always an aspect of social life, an abstraction we make from observing an individual's way of coping with his relations to others. Hamlet is a play about disinheritance, experienced in its most drastic form, at the heart of a fully dramatized social world. It presents a hero who, though he should be the embodiment of the heritage—"The glass of fashion and the mould of form, / Th' observ'd of all
observers”—is "blasted with ecstasy" (III.i.153-54, 160). Hamlet's struggle to cope with the desecration of heritage, his outrageousness in response to outrage, his piety in spite of it, his struggle for expression—it is these social realities and gestures that make the play's psychological configurations expressible, and that enable Hamlet to keep its relevance through changing historical situations.

Freud provided a bridge from individual to social development in observing that the individual conscience, the cultural heritage as reflected in one's system of values and sense of self, is formed through the child's internalization of the culturally shaped values of the parents. So too are individual attitudes toward and conceptions of the larger powers that sustain life. In a culture with an effectual religion, God is manifest in one's awareness of what validates and supports society, history, the universe. In a secularized culture, we still arrive, at maturity, at an awareness that the validating ground of individual life is larger than individuals. Acceptance of the parents' finitude and imperfection is part of the transfer of piety that recognizes the larger, culturally confirmed context as the source of the parents' being as well as the being of the child. A broader piety takes over from infantile dependence and, insofar as it does that, frees the child from the parents, permits him, in becoming a child of God, or a child of the times, to become a man.

Successful development permits the child to forgive the parents for not being gods; fixation along the road of development results in crippling investments of love and hate in idolatrous objects, parents or parent-substitutes. The deferred afflictions of the Oedipus complex, whether at the crisis of adolescence or erupting in later life, represent a crisis in the piety that normally sustains one's identity. In Hamlet, the father's return as a Ghost makes him the object of the son's idolatry. An idol is an inadequate image of the divine because it intervenes between the individual's worship and his awareness of the larger force in which he and his world are grounded. But his father's spirit is all that Prince Hamlet has. His lack of a stable, integrated image of the father at the core of himself makes the Ghost walk, creates the need to find him outside. And it allows filial piety to become an obsession. The Prince is trapped because his piety cannot get beyond the Ghost of his noble father, murdered by another father, ignoble, gross, revolting.

The Ghost, because it embodies the whole valid moral and social heritage, cuts off the protagonist (and to a large extent the play) from any wider allegiance. The nexus with what should be is almost entirely through Hamlet. Christian commentators, Roy Battenhouse, for instance, or Eleanor Prosser, point out that from a Christian point of view Hamlet embraces a sinful course in accepting the Ghost's charge to avenge his father's death, for "vengeance is mine, saith the Lord." Hamlet pursues his ghostly father's will in place of God's will. To see the play from this vantage point, however, is to let us, and Hamlet, out of the modern world that this play helps to usher in; it is to propose an alternative that simply is not present within the play's fable. The fact that Hamlet is the legitimate heir makes him, will he nill he, the final court of appeal and authority that should bring Claudius to justice. It is an appalling situation of aloneness, an appalling task.

Hamlet has to meet the dismaying isolation of his secret, which Shakespeare makes us realize as soon as the others rejoin him after the Ghost has gone:

I hold it fit that we shake hands and part,
You, as your business and desire shall point you,
For every man hath business and desire,
Such as it is, and for my own poor part,
I will go pray.

(I.v. 128-32)

Already there is the sense that nothing ordinary—"business and desire, / Such as it is"—matters. Hamlet's "and for my own poor part, / I will go pray," in its terrible sense of aloneness, edges on ironic recognition of his situation, in which the religious dimension, the supernatural beyond the Ghost, is already out of range. We
see the intensity of his suffering and isolation through the eyes of Ophelia in the next scene, where she reports that he has come to her closet looking "As if he had been loosed out of hell" (II.i.80). We feel his isolation too in the false diagnosis of Polonius, in Ophelia's helplessness, in his situation of being spied on, both by Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and by the King and Polonius—with Ophelia as bait. Hamlet's heroic identity, his greatness, is his power of maintaining himself in his relation to the Ghost and in the vision of the world's corruption that goes with it.

In dramatizing this heroic striving, Hamlet, more than any other play, invites identification with the hero and yet does not fully guide us in what we are to make of him. We identify with all the tragic protagonists, of course; but we also regularly feel horror, dismay, or even something like amusement:

LEAR: Dost thou call me fool, boy?

FOOL: All thy other titles thou hast given away, that thou wast born with.

(Lr. I.iv. 148-50)

We are aware, regularly, of more than the protagonist is, and this awareness balances the claims of the protagonist on us. But once Hamlet has seen the Ghost in the third scene, there is scarcely a moment in the action when anyone in the play, or in the audience, knows more than Hamlet knows. He even intimates that he sees through to the King's purposes in sending him to England: "I see a cherub that sees them" (IV.iii.48). Such judgments as are made on Hamlet are pointedly not to the point. We see through others with him, while the others are unable to see through him, to pluck out the heart of his mystery.

A curious impunity surrounds Hamlet. Although he is outrageous, insulting, impudent, people do not call him on it. After Hamlet has described the repulsiveness of old men to Polonius's face, the old man diverts indignation into objective observation: "Though this be madness, yet there is method in't" (II.ii.205-6). Or again with Ophelia:

HAMLET: I did love you once.

OPHELIA: Indeed, my lord, you made me believe so.

HAMLET: You should not have believ'd me, for virtue cannot so inoculate our old stock but we shall relish of it. I lov'd you not.

OPHELIA: I was the more deceiv'd.

(III.i.114-19)

The lack of direct response to Hamlet's outrageousness goes with the assumption that he is mad or deranged. Ophelia, who does not know how deeply his jilting has hurt her until she goes mad, says "O, help him, you sweet heavens!" and finally, "O, what a noble mind is here o'erthrown!" (lines 133, 150).

Even the King holds himself almost entirely in check, not taking up Hamlet's insults and insinuations:

KING: How fares our cousin Hamlet?

HAMLET: Excellent, i' faith, of the chameleon's dish: I eat the air, promisecramm'd—you cannot feed capons so.
KING: I have nothing with this answer, Hamlet, these words are not mine.

(III.ii.92-97)

Part of the other characters' helplessness, of course, comes from the sudden, shifting, half-hidden wit with which Hamlet attacks, as here, where he takes the would-be agreeable "How fares our cousin," how do you do, as though it were how do you eat, and answers "I eat the air" (your promises), implying promises instead of the substance of the succession that you have taken from me. "You cannot feed [even] capons so"—and, by implication, I am no capon. No wonder the King can say no more than "I have nothing with this answer, Hamlet, these words are not mine."

Only the Queen, in the pitch of excitement after the play-within-the-play, sets about wholeheartedly to rebuke her son, and she gets back, at once, better than she gives, as Hamlet turns her phrase: "Hamlet, thou hast thy father much offended." "Mother, you have my father much offended" (III.iv.9-10). When he has killed the man behind the arras, her natural humanity cries out: "O, what a rash and bloody deed is this!" only to be put down at once by "A bloody deed! almost as bad, good mother, / As kill a king, and marry with his brother" (lines 27-29). Part of the tragedy, of course, is that his mother has forfeited the moral authority that might provide a vantage point from which to grieve for the "unseen good old man" (IV.i.12). There is thus no one to comment on the frightfulness with which Hamlet dismisses the death of Polonius when he discovers whom he has killed: "Thou wretched, rash, intruding fool, farewell! / I took thee for thy better" (III.iv.31-32). Instead, Hamlet immediately returns to upbraiding his mother: "Leave wringing of your hands. Peace, sit you down, / And let me wring your heart" (lines 34-35).

As we watch the play, or are swept along in reading it, we are not invited to pause over the cruelty of Hamlet's taunts. The killing of Polonius makes more real the violence pent up in Hamlet; there is relief that he has reached to action, even if only in unpremeditated response, together with regret that it is not, as for a moment he thinks possible, the King he has killed. Polonius has been exhibited as something of a fool in his own right, a dotard version of the father-figure. The lack of compunction Hamlet feels about a man dead functions for us as a measure of the intensity of his deep sense of outrage about the people who matter. Indeed, his ruthlessness is somehow a testimony to his all-absorbing, heroic commitment to feeling the outrage done to life by the murder of his father and by what he perceives as his mother's infidelity.

The play is blind to Hamlet's faults except insofar as they are expressed by Hamlet himself. To insist on them, to go beyond Hamlet's own perceptions in dwelling on his destructiveness, his egotism, his ineffectualness and irresponsibility, is in a curious way discourteous, doing violence to an alliance with the sweet prince that audiences enjoy. When Hamlet plays hide-and-seek with those sent to find where he has hidden the body of Polonius, we enjoy his exhilarated fun in baffling everybody:

ROSENCRANTZ: What have you done, my lord, with the dead body?

HAMLET: Compounded it with dust, whereto 'tis kin.

(IV.ii.5-6)

There is a curious beauty about Hamlet's answer: it puts the death in the context of last things, suggesting a vision of mortality that makes life scarcely matter. But at such a moment, what an evasion, and how arrogant, how upstaging! That this is Hamlet's intention is manifest in the sequel about the sponge and the son of a king. And yet we are with Hamlet here as he puts the little eager terriers in their place.

We are with him even more, of course, when at last he is brought in, guarded, face to face with the King, who has seen the play, so that the chips are down between them:
KING: NOW, Hamlet, where's Polonius?

HAMLET: At supper.

KING: At supper? where?

HAMLET: Not where he eats, but where 'a is eaten; a certain convocation of politic worms are e'en at him. Your worm is your only emperor for diet: we fat all creatures else to fat us, and we fat ourselves for maggots; your fat king and your lean beggar is but variable service, two dishes, but to one table—that's the end.

(IV.iii. 16-25)

This is the high point in the antics of Hamlet's madness and worth pausing over as a marvelous example of the way he keeps everyone else off balance by the displacements of wit: "At supper." "At supper? where?" The King, who should be on top, is maneuvered into the position of fall-guy. This technique of setting up the loaded leading question is of course standard with the Shakespearean clown or fool, and the discipline of writing such parts lay behind Shakespeare's handling of Hamlet's antic disposition. In effect, the Prince plays the fool's part as well as the hero's; his assumed madness gives him the equivalent of the court fool's license, which Shakespeare had recently exploited as a dramatic resource in As You Like It and Twelfth Night. Part of the fool's stock in trade was the pithy sententious generalization, suddenly brought home by fitting it to present company. Hamlet turns Polonius into a supper for politic worms, with as much relish as disgust—leaving behind all question of his own particular responsibility for the old man's death as he rises to sweeping statement: "we fat all creatures else to fat us." And meanwhile his invisible fool's-bladder keeps bobbing the King, showing him "how a king may go a progress through the guts of a beggar" (lines 30-31). His direct access to aggressive action against the King blocked, Hamlet plays the fool to enable himself to maintain the integrity of his hatred.

If we stop to add up Hamlet's actions and inactions, we find a catalogue of outrage and failure. But the play does not situate us to stop, does not provide anyone to help in the process of evaluation. No one in the play observes that Hamlet fails Ophelia. We see her and can collect from the fragments of her madness an idea of her profound shock from the cruel disappointment of maiden ardor, along with her grief for the father Hamlet killed. Her loss of Hamlet, indeed, is partly expressed through grief for her father. But Hamlet is off at sea; he is not brought to confront anything of how he has failed her. On the contrary, at her grave he is able to say, without any environing irony:

I lov'd Ophelia. Forty thousand brothers
Could not with all their quantity of love
Make up my sum.

(V.i.269-71)

Hamlet arranges for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to be "put to sudden death, / Not shriving time allow'd" (V.ii.46-47). "So Guildenstern and Rosencrantz go to't" (line 56) is the only comment, from Horatio, on the drastic expedience with which Hamlet deals with what are, after all, only ignorant agents. Again, no one comments on his complete lack of a viable plan of practical action, even after his return from England. The nearest thing to such a comment is Horatio's practical reminder, while Hamlet rails against the King, that time is passing: "It must be shortly known to him from England / What is the issue of the business there" (V.ii.71-72). Hamlet's response—"It will be short; the interim's mine, / And a man's life's no more than to say 'one" (lines 73-74)—is one of the great, heroic moments of the play. The current of resolution, so long diffused and roiled, sweeps deep and silent through the magical word "interim," as that word opens up after
the strong monosyllables. But the fact remains that he does not make any plan, accepting instead the initiative of the King and Laertes, with the result that it is not the King alone who dies, but also the Queen, Laertes, and Hamlet himself.

In creating the role of Hamlet, Shakespeare, exploiting fully the resources of the new theater, could define a new position with respect to heritage, expressing loss of heritage with all its doubts, uncertainty, loathing of self and life, but also exhibiting a hero with strength to protect integrity against acquiescence in the corrupt world, on one side, or acquiescence in self-loathing, on the other. Hamlet is a potentially great man protecting his greatness, the greatness of the demand he makes on life, even as life fails or betrays that demand. What Hamlet has to meet this challenge, to master the enormously disruptive energies it releases in him, is his power of expression. He must save himself from suicide, and he does this in part by expressing his need for it, both directly and in violent self-contempt. It is also essential that he turn aggression outward, affirming the reality of corruption and violence. His power of expression works to prevent or divert him from taking direct action even as it gives theatrical release, assertive and ironic in the terms he establishes, to his aggression; but without it Hamlet could not maintain his wounded identity at all.

It is Hamlet's need for expression that lightens his spirits as soon as he hears that the players are coming. He uses them at once, calling for a speech that serves to identify what is working inside him. As in 1 Henry IV, where we have a "play extempore" about a son's confrontation with his royal father, here we have a speech extempore, part of which Hamlet has by heart, about the destruction of a revered, aged king by a figure who is not restrained from action by any scruples whatever, "rugged Pyrrhus." It is a speech that, in its poised ambiguity, objectifies both Hamlet's feelings of grief and outrage "for a king, / Upon whose property and most dear life / A damn'd defeat was made," and Hamlet's wish that he could "make oppression bitter" by fattening "all the region kites / With this slave's offal" (II.ii.569-71, 578-80). We and Hamlet can experience both the horror of the killing of good old Priam and the terrible zest of it. It even swings around a moment of delay when Illium "stoops to his base," and Pyrrhus, distracted by the hideous crash, "like a neutral to his will and matter, / Did nothing" (lines 476, 481-82).

In developing Hamlet's preoccupation with the players, Shakespeare makes much of the use and abuse of expression and of its inadequacy as an answer to his protagonist's whole need. Hamlet's comments on acting rigorously subordinate the actors' need for expression to "the purpose of the playing, whose end, both at the first and now, was and is, to hold as 'twere the mirror up to nature: to show virtue her feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure" (III.ii.20-24). Self is to be wholly absorbed in the discipline of playing as it looks beyond itself. Hamlet's whole discussion notably leaves out the personal motives, the need for self-preservation or reduplication, that animate the playing: "for in the very torrent, tempest, and, as I may say, whirlwind of your passion, you must acquire and beget a temperance that may give it smoothness" (III.ii.5-8). The individual's acting must fulfill, not disrupt, the team enterprise: no "necessary question of the play" (lines 42-43) must be neglected.

It is striking how fully Hamlet dramatizes the personal need for playing and formal theatrical action that is left out of Hamlet's account of the process as a professional discipline. Hamlet has "that within which passes show," but he is preoccupied by "actions that a man might play" (I.ii.85, 84). He feels the pressure toward theatrical violence that Kyd played on in The Spanish Tragedy, and he will often "tear a passion to tatters" (III.ii.9-10) in response to it. Dismayed by his own inaction, Hamlet laments:

   Yet I,
   A dull and muddy-mettled rascal, peak
   Like John-a-dreams, unpregnant of my cause,
   And can say nothing.

(II.ii.566-69)
But in fact, of course, he is carried away in a torrent of words:

Am I a coward?
Who calls me villain, breaks my pate across,
Plucks off my beard and blows it in my face,
Tweaks me by the nose, gives me the lie throat
As deep as to the lungs? Who does me this?
Hah, 'swounds, I should take it.

(lines 571-76)

Hamlet, as usual, is the only one who sees the irony about Hamlet. And, as usual, unaffected by it, he proceeds at once to a further use of expression:

I'll have these players
Play something like the murther of my father
Before mine uncle. I'll observe his looks,
I'll tent him to the quick. If 'a do blench,
I know my course.

(lines 594-98)

"The Murder of Gonzago" is intended by Hamlet to move acting to action by making the King proclaim his guilt. When it comes to the test, however, Shakespeare has Hamlet himself interrupt the necessary business of the play by aggressively summarizing its action instead of waiting for it to have its full effect on Claudius:

'A poisons him i' th' garden for his estate. His name's Gonzago, the story is extant, and written in very choice Italian. You shall see anon how the murtherer gets the love of Gonzago's wife.

OPHELIA: The King rises.

(III.ii.261-65)

That the poisoner is the "nephew to the king" (line 244), as Hamlet blurts out at his entrance, makes what is acted, while replicating the crime of Claudius, simultaneously present a figure in Hamlet's relationship to Claudius reenacting the murder, as though to fit the crime exactly to the punishment, to "re-venge by re-presentation."16

The enormous poetic and dramatic creativity achieved in *Hamlet* depends in good part on this pressure to turn speech and acting into action. The need to channel aggression through verbal and theatrical expression in turn depends on the initial, given situation of the two powerful fathers, one murdered by the other, with Hamlet identified with both. Hamlet asserts himself by loathing Claudius; he asserts his father by loathing himself, including the repressed part of himself identified with Claudius's double crime of murder and incest. The constant discharge of cruelty at others is Hamlet's relief from the hideous suffering of his aggression toward himself. Release reaches manic proportions in the rhapsody of elation that follows the play-within-the-play. But the deep movement of the aggression that occupies Hamlet looks toward death, so that by the fifth act the universalizing of death in the graveyard is lyric release. The final havoc carries out the death-directed wish in action.

But whatever our conclusions when we add up Hamlet's actions, we are left with a sense of Hamlet as a moral hero in defeat, a sense of tragic loss, not just the sensational excitement of a revel in a blood bath. Why should
this be so? Part of our high sense of Hamlet in death is Shakespeare's skillful manipulation. In the previous scene, the satiric-lyrical universals of the graveyard have opened the floodgates, and the burial of Ophelia has given occasion for a new sort of self-affirmation. Then in the last scene Hamlet's gracious, sociable self is recovered and brought home to us at moments—with Osric for foil, for example—together with the resolution born of the acceptance of death:

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.

(V.ii.220-22)

There is a staginess about some of it: Hamlet's apology to Laertes, for example, and Laertes' to Hamlet. But there is also Hamlet's concern, as he dies, about the succession, and about his "story," which Horatio must tell: "Report me and my cause aright / To the unsatisfied" (lines 339-40). And we do feel, through these gestures, the abortive effort of a younger generation to renew society, a striving toward health.

Yet the tragic dignity and loss must be more than these final heroics—must be something earned, on the basis of a deeper striving. It must be something beyond the meaning we get if we simply reduce Hamlet's problem to the Oedipus complex—and yet it must be consistent with the presence of that complex, for the Freudian explanation clearly works. T. S. Eliot puts us on the way to part of an answer, I think, in his famous criticism of the play as "an artistic failure." Eliot observed that "Hamlet (the man) is dominated by an emotion which is inexpressible, because it is in excess of the facts as they appear. And the supposed identity of Hamlet with his author is genuine to this point: that Hamlet's bafflement at the absence of objective equivalent to his feelings is a prolongation of the bafflement of his creator in the face of his artistic problem" (p. 125). Eliot, responding to his own deepest preoccupations, as manifest later in his dramatic version of the Orestes-Hamlet theme, The Family Reunion, concluded that "Shakespeare's Hamlet, in so far as it is Shakespeare's [and not an adaptation of a lost earlier version, probably by Kyd], is a play dealing with the effect of a mother's guilt upon her son, and that Shakespeare was unable to impose this motive successfully upon the 'intractable material' of the old play" (p. 123). Hamlet's disgust for his mother "envelops and exceeds her. It is thus a feeling which he cannot understand; he cannot objectify it, and it therefore remains to poison life and obstruct action. None of the possible actions can satisfy it; and nothing that Shakespeare can do with the plot can express Hamlet for him" (p. 125).

What Eliot ignores, focusing only on Hamlet's disgust in response to his guilty mother, is Hamlet's own sense of guilt—what the Freudian explanation makes central. Hamlet's guilt refers to his father not his mother; more accurately, it refers to his parricidal wish. It is this that cannot be given objective expression. The "possible action" that would correspond to this wish is not accessible, because the Ghost is a ghost. Hamlet cannot kill a ghost. Nor can he realize that the destructive force of his effort to serve the Ghost, to retrieve the heritage of his lost father, has its roots in the filial bond he struggles to keep intact by making it the entirety of his life. The given situation, Claudius's murder of the elder Hamlet, demands absolute loyalty to the memory of the idealized father and permits the diversion of the son's murderous wish from father to uncle. But since this repressed wish is unconsciously tied to the assumption that its enactment means death, Hamlet's hatred cannot be directed at Claudius without being deflected back onto himself as well. In the end, Hamlet is able to accept his destiny only when he has accepted death; he finally kills Claudius only when he himself has already received his death blow. It is Hamlet's "bafflement" in this situation that extends into the play the problem confronting its creator.

But Hamlet is, as Eliot said, a "puzzling" play, and "disquieting as is none of the others." It is a play in which something gets out of hand. In it Shakespeare poses—and leaves open—the problem of control that later tragedies will master by an ironic balance. Fully achieved tragedy shows us, typically, a heroic protagonist rich in human values and commanding sympathy, but ultimately destructive. The action, in
leading the protagonist to his death, moves us toward ironic awareness of his role in necessitating the tragic outcome. Poised against the hero's aggressive self-assertion, and shaping our understanding of it, irony is the aggressive assertion of a vantage point on the protagonist by means of the dramatist's control over the whole action. Ironic awareness enables us to see, from the outside, the limitations and the destructive force of a figure who, like King Lear, is simultaneously the object of our full sympathy. In Hamlet we are invited to identify with the hero at the expense of comprehensive ironic perspective; there is no adequate basis for an outside, controlling perspective. The single-sided attitude it creates toward its hero is one of the striking differences between Hamlet and the ensuing tragedies. What the play does not provide is ruthless awareness of Hamlet, such awareness as we are to get of Othello, Lear, Macbeth, Antony, Coriolanus.

The play's failure to situate us to see its protagonist from any vantage point beyond that which Hamlet provides on himself extends Hamlet's failure to see past the Ghost, to develop a perspective on his majestic father beyond his immediate and absolute dedication of himself to identification with the Ghost. We said earlier that the Ghost gives theatrical embodiment to the overwhelming pressure of a potentially disabling predicament. The Ghost is theatrical in the straightforward sense that it is the enactment of a fantasy possible only in the theater. The fantasy comes in answer to the wish Hamlet has earlier recognized as beyond fulfillment in remembering his father: "'A was a man, take him for all in all, / I shall not look upon his like again" (I.ii. 188-89). But with the appearance of the Ghost to him, Hamlet is subjected, as we are with him, to a devastating theatrical power. The creation of the Ghost is an experiment in theatrical aggression that forecloses the possibility of ironic control. Shakespeare mimes omnipotence of mind to transform an impossible fantasy into theatrical actuality, unleashing the profoundly disruptive powers of the new theater in an open-ended way to engage and unsettle the audience as well as those who, within the play, encounter this "dreaded sight" beyond the reach of any controlling perspective.

The harrowing force of the Ghost's presence is registered fully, first in the responses of Horatio and the sentinels in the magnificent opening scene, then in Hamlet's agonized questions on the battlements:

What may this mean,
That thou, dead corse, again in complete steel
Revisits thus the glimpses of the moon,
Making night hideous, and we fools of nature
So horridly to shake our disposition
With thoughts beyond the reaches of our souls?
Say why is this? wherefore? what should we do?

(I.v.51-57)

As the Ghost departs Hamlet thinks he can participate in this power, which answers to a deep need within himself:

My fate cries out
And makes each petty artere in this body
As hardy as the Nemean lion's nerve.
Still am I call'd.

(lines 81-84)

But despite the Prince's conviction here that the Ghost beckons to him with the call of enabling fate, and despite his subsequent absolute commitment to avenging his father's death, for Hamlet the Ghost's appearance puts out of reach the solution it seems at first to provide.
In Hamlet's confrontation with the spirit of his dead father, the overpowering pressure that Shakespeare copes with by creating the Ghost becomes the situation the protagonist must cope with within the play. Hamlet's means of coping is his use of theatrical aggression to engage and unsettle his audience within the play. In taking on a theatrical role like that of the licensed fool and adding to it the special heroic dimension of his extraordinary power to generalize skepticism and disillusion, Hamlet can keep his enemies at a distance while maintaining himself in the face of a potentially self-destructive predicament in which the inhibitions blocking direct action are insurmountable. And by using the players to stage "something like the murther of my father / Before mine uncle" (II.ii.595-96), he can give aggressive theatrical embodiment to the traumatic event revealed to him by the Ghost, releasing himself from its paralyzing force, at least momentarily, by directing it against Claudius.

In presenting the play-within-the-play, Hamlet is preoccupied with a motive and a cue for passion that come not from the fiction and the rhythm of an integrated dramatic performance but from within, and from offstage. To look at the place of Hamlet in Shakespeare's development is to consider how the cue for the whole play comes from Shakespeare, as the cue for the play-within-the-play comes from Hamlet. In Hamlet we can see the shift from the earlier work, with its base in a cherishing, parental sensibility that avoids full confrontation with fathers, to the confrontations with authority and heritage, grounded in relationship to the father, that characterize the great tragedies. The next section will take up the matter of how the hostility toward a good father not dealt with in Hamlet can be seen in what animates Iago in his enterprise of bringing out the weakness of a martial hero rather like Hamlet's father. Iago uses only what is potentially within his victim to make Othello destroy himself in the belief that he had been betrayed by his wife, as King Hamlet was betrayed. The naked parricidal motive against a gracious figure, in the attempt to become "no less than all" (Lr. III.iii.24), only finally gets physical enactment in the dagger that so horrifies Macbeth as he makes his way toward the murder of Duncan. In Hamlet, both Hamlet and Shakespeare understand as wholly separate objects of idolatry and hatred the single figure of a father who engenders the divided response of enduring loyalty and deadly opposition.

But if Hamlet's situation in the play reflects Shakespeare's predicament in constructing it, the play, in following out the destructive consequences of Hamlet's filial distress, also dramatizes the heroic and potentially paralyzing dimensions of a recurring cultural crisis that has its roots in Shakespeare's age and reaches into our own. Hamlet situates its hero, and its audience, at the node of despair and revolutionary protest, both of which draw perennially on heroic expectations whose roots are in infancy but whose definition is itself a heritage of culture:

See what a grace was seated on this brow:
Hyperion's curls, the front of Jove himself,
An eye like Mars, to threaten and command,
A station like the herald Mercury
New lighted on a heaven-kissing hill,
A combination and a form indeed,
Where every god did seem to set his seal
To give the world assurance of a man.
This was your husband. Look you now what follows:
Here is your husband, like a mildewed ear,
Blasting his wholesome brother.

(III.iv.55-65)

To vindicate the one, the other must be destroyed. Because in the almost four hundred years since Hamlet was written, Western men have repeatedly found themselves in predicaments akin to its hero's, the play's open-ended structure has taken up into itself unresolved energies of commitment and protest in successive
generations. As Hazlitt put it, "It is we who are Hamlet. The play has a prophetic truth, which is above that of history." This is a great destiny for a work of art, though there is a further kind of power in fully achieved tragedy.

In considering the radically disruptive, potentially revolutionary energies in *Hamlet*, it is crucial to recognize, however, that neither the hero nor the play envisages any alternative society. Marx pointed out how revolutionary groups have ennobled their goals by dressing themselves in the borrowed robes of earlier epochs, the English Puritans as Old Testament prophets, the French revolutionaries as Roman Republicans. In Shakespeare's own time the revolutionary appeal of the Reformation to the primitive church was being urged by the radical religious minority—for example, in the Marprelate tracts. The revolutionary impulse to think of innovation as the restoration of a pristine integrity clearly reflects psychological roots similar to those which animate Hamlet's expressions of disgust, protest, and the need for vindication. But there is no suggestion whatever in *Hamlet* of any alternative to established social forms, despite the Prince's drastic expression of their corruption and their limitations: "Then are our beggars bodies, and our monarchs and outstretch'd heroes the beggars' shadows" (II.ii.263-64).

The hero's criticism of society is shaped by the tradition of Christian disillusion, *de contemptu mundi*, rather than Protestant protest:

HAMLET: A man may fish with the worm that hath eat of a king, and eat of the fish that hath fed of that worm.

CLAUDIUS: What dost thou mean by this?

HAMLET: Nothing but to show you how a king may go a progress through the guts of a beggar.

(IV.iii.27-31)

The Christian discipline of contemplation, as in, say, a representation of the Dance of Death, used such recognitions to turn the heart away from the world to allegiance to Christ. One response to Hamlet's predicament would be to turn from the world to religious objects—the response that Eliot dramatized in *The Family Reunion*, or "Follow the Furies," as that play was first titled.

But Hamlet does not move from loss to the promise of resurrection in Christ, as the Burial of the Dead invites mourners to do. Part of the tremendous originality of *Hamlet* is to present what might have been a religious problem without a religious solution: in other words, a potentially revolutionary situation. For Hamlet, however, there is neither the hope of resolution of later centuries focused on revolutionary change, nor the traditional Christian hope of resolution through participation in Christ's sacrifice. Hamlet is a hero because he maintains the core of his commitment, even though he confronts the revolutionary potential of the Oedipal predicament without any way to know what it is, without benefit of clergy, so to speak. Instead, the Ghost provides a father in some ways godlike, in which the hero invests something like worship, while the hero, in going about his father's business, invites our participation in his involuntary and imperfect sacrifice.

*Hamlet* is not, I think, a fully achieved tragedy, but rather a heroic-prophetic play with a "tragical" ending—in its vastly more complex and meaningful way, a play like *Tamburlaine*. It differs from *Tamburlaine* in presenting, not heroic outrage by direct assault upon tradition, but a crisis in the transmission of heritage that leads to heroic outrage. In its concern with inheritance, and in its focus on desperation—on the need for revenge as the core of a need for expression and vindication, on passive vulnerability struggling to become active, on language of magical expectation contorted into distraction, wit, or madness—*Hamlet* is remarkably like the one early play outside Marlowe's work that is both seminal and in its own right great, Kyd's *Spanish
Both plays call for an identification with the hero's alienation that excludes critical perspective. As with Hieronimo's dedication to avenging his son's death, Hamlet's tie to the Ghost of his father is so total, with no one there except him to evaluate it, that the play cannot dramatize an understanding of Hamlet's destructiveness from a tragic perspective larger than his own. My own feeling is that Hamlet is not fully under control, just because, as Eliot said, too much of the author is in the Prince—though its very open-endedness is what, pace Eliot, makes the play's distinctive greatness. But to bring under full artistic control what Shakespeare was dealing with, there was unfinished business, notably the business of seeing through the ideal father.

Notes

14 In *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, Freud writes: "The child's super-ego is in fact constructed on the model not of its parents but of its parents' super-ego; the contents which fill it are the same and it becomes the vehicle of tradition and of all the time-resisting judgements of value which have propagated themselves in this manner from generation to generation" (*Standard Edition*, vol. 22, p. 67).

15 For Battenhouse, "Hamlet's inability to discriminate this fact [that the Ghost is a "damned spirit"] is at the core of his tragedy, . . . a tragedy inseparable from his own decayed faith" (Roy Battenhouse, "The Ghost in *Hamlet: A Catholic 'Linchpin'?") *Studies in Philology* 48 [1951]: 192). See also chap. 4 of his *Shakespearean Tragedy: Its Art and Its Christian Premises* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1969), pp. 204-66. On the basis of extensive readings in both Protestant and Catholic writings on ghosts, Prosser finds a "definitive test": "No matter how convincing a spirit might be in every other respect, if it urged any action or made any statement that violated the teachings of the Church, it was an agent of the Devil" (Eleanor Prosser, *Hamlet and Revenge* [Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1967], p. 111).

16 David Willbern, from whose work in progress this phrase is borrowed, observes that the need to do this is deeply grounded in the psychology of revenge and is a consistent feature of the revenge-play form, with its plays-(and audiences)-within-plays.


18 Ibid. In considering *Hamlet* in relation to Shakespeare's power of development, it is well to recall Ella Freeman Sharpe's telling distinction: "The poet is not Hamlet. Hamlet is what he might have been if he had not written the play of *Hamlet*" (*Collected Papers on Psycho-Analysis*, ed. Marjorie Brierly [London: Hogarth Press, 1950], p. 205).


20 Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (New York: International Publishers, 1963), pp. 15-17. Marx distinguished such self-sanctioning by identification with a heroic past from his own call for a proletariat revolution: "The social revolution of the nineteenth century cannot draw its poetry from the past, but only from the future" (p. 18). In "The Resurrected Romans" (*The Tradition of the New* [New York: McGraw-Hill, 1965]), Harold Rosenberg turns Marx's observation back against the revolutionary optimism it was designed to serve: "The true image of the historical drama would be less *The Communist Manifesto*, with its symmetrical human movements, than *Hamlet*, in which those on stage are exposed at all times to the never-quieted dead" (p. 168). That *Hamlet* is no longer regarded as Shakespeare's preeminent masterpiece, as it was in the age of romantic and revolutionary enthusiasm, may be partly because we are more aware of the problematic character of revolutionary hopes.
Some of the common players, in the period when Shakespeare was starting in the theater, ventured to enter the Marprelate controversy on the establishment side, and after initial encouragement, were told firmly to leave religious matters alone. The Anglican establishment, under Archbishop Whitgift, was savagely repressing the radicals, resisting any further development of the reformation tendency. See E. K. Chambers, *The Elizabethan Stage* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1923), vol. 1, pp. 261, 295.


**Janet Adelman (essay date 1992)**


*In the following essay, Adelman explores the way in which Gertrude disrupts the familial and sexual relationships in Hamlet, and argues that her presence disables the son's relationship with the father.*

In *Hamlet*, the figure of the mother returns to Shakespeare's dramatic world, and her presence causes the collapse of the fragile compact that had allowed Shakespeare to explore familial and sexual relationships in the histories and romantic comedies without devastating conflict; this collapse is the point of origin of the great tragic period. The son's acting out of the role of the father, his need to make his own identity in relationship to his conception of his father—the stuff of *1 and 2 Henry IV* and *Julius Caesar*—becomes deeply problematic in the presence of the wife/mother: for her presence makes the father's sexual role a disabling crux in the son's relationship with his father. At the same time, the relations between the sexes that had been imagined in the comedies without any serious confrontation with the power of female sexuality suddenly are located in the context of the mother's power to contaminate, with the result that they can never again be imagined in purely holiday terms. Here again, *Hamlet* stands as a kind of watershed, subjecting to maternal presence the relationships previously exempted from that presence.¹

From the perspective of *Hamlet*, the father-son relationships of the earlier plays begin to look like oedipal dramas from which the chief object of contention has been removed. Both the *Henry IV* plays and *Julius Caesar* manage their sophisticated psychological explorations in effect by denying that women have anything to do with these explorations, ultimately by denying the complications that the mother poses for the father-son relationship. Before *Hamlet*, this relationship tends to be enacted in the political rather than the domestic sphere, and in the absence of women. Insofar as the triangulated conflict characteristic of oedipal material makes its way into these plays, the triangle is composed of a son and two fathers, not of a son and his parents; the son's identity is defined by his position between the fathers, not between father and mother. The *Henry IV* plays and *Julius Caesar* both strikingly represent the defining act of the son's manhood as the process of choosing between two fathers; in both, the son attempts to become fully himself by identifying with the true father rather than the false, an identification signaled by the son's willingness to carry out the true father's wish that the false father be disowned or killed. But the choice becomes increasingly problematic in these plays. In *1 and 2 Henry IV*, it is a relatively easy matter for Hal to kill off that "father ruffian" Falstaff (*1 Henry IV*, 2.4.254) by exiling him, thus becoming "father" to his brothers (*2 Henry IV*, 5.2.57) and the embodiment of his father's spirit (*2 Henry IV*, 5.2.125); in this cross-generational alliance, he becomes himself in effect by choosing to become his father. Although we may feel that he has diminished himself in his choice, the plays do not finally encourage us to wish other choices on him or to dwell at length on the selfhood he has lost. The choice and its outcome are far more complex in *Julius Caesar*, where becoming oneself by becoming one's ancestral father necessitates killing off—literally, not symbolically—a much more ambiguously powerful father than Falstaff. Brutus is pushed toward conspiracy partly by his desire to live up to the image of his great ancestor and namesake, Junius Brutus, the slayer of tyrants (see, for example, 1.2.158; 1.3.82, 146; 2.1.53,
322). But immediately after Brutus has killed the man whom he himself sees as "the foremost man of all this world" (4.3.22), his enabling ancestral father drops out of the play; reference to him entirely disappears. In place of this father, the figure of Caesar increasingly comes to loom like a paternal ghost over the play, obliterating the memory of the heroic father on whom Brutus had hoped to found his selfhood. This interchange of fathers neatly poses one aspect of Brutus's tragic dilemma: Brutus kills one father apparently to satisfy the wishes of another, only to discover that he has slain the wrong father, that the dead father is not only more powerful but more powerfully his; only in killing Caesar—only as Caesar says "Et tu, Brutus?"—does he come to realize his position as Caesar's son and hence to suffer the disabling guilt that is the consequence of parricide.²

The triangulated choice between two fathers that is characteristic of these plays is at the center of Hamlet; here, as in the earlier plays, assuming masculine identity means taking on the qualities of the father's name—becoming a Henry, a Brutus, or a Hamlet—by killing off a false father. Moreover, the whole weight of the play now manifestly creates one father true and the other false. Nonetheless, the choice is immeasurably more difficult for Hamlet than for his predecessors; for despite their manifest differences, the fathers in Hamlet keep threatening to collapse into one another, annihilating in their collapse the son's easy assumption of his father's identity. The initiating cause of this collapse is Hamlet's mother: her failure to serve her son as the repository of his father's ideal image by mourning him appropriately is the symptom of her deeper failure to distinguish properly between his father and his father's brother.³ Even at the start of the play, before the ghost's crucial revelation, Gertrude's failure to differentiate has put an intolerable strain on Hamlet by making him the only repository of his father's image, the only agent of differentiation in a court that seems all too willing to accept the new king in place of the old. Her failure of memory—registered in her indiscriminating sexuality—in effect defines Hamlet's task in relation to his father as a task of memory: as she forgets, he inherits the burden of differentiating, of idealizing and making static the past; hence the ghost's insistence on remembering (1.5.33, 91) and the degree to which Hamlet registers his failure to avenge his father as a failure of memory (4.4.40). Hamlet had promised the ghost to remember him in effect by becoming him, letting his father's commandment live all alone within his brain; but the intensity of Hamlet's need to idealize in the face of his mother's failure makes his father inaccessible to him as a model, hence disrupts the identification from which he could accomplish his vengeance. As his memory of his father pushes increasingly in the direction of idealization, Hamlet becomes more acutely aware of his own distance from that idealization and hence of his likeness to Claudius,⁴ who is defined chiefly by his difference from his father. Difference from the heroic ideal represented in Old Hamlet becomes the defining term common to Claudius and Hamlet: the very act of distinguishing Claudius from his father—"no more like my father / Than I to Hercules" (1.2.152-53)—forces Hamlet into imaginative identification with Claudius. The intensity of Hamlet's need to differentiate between true father and false thus confounds itself, disabling his identification with his father and hence his secure identity as son.

If Gertrude's presence in Hamlet undoes the strategy by which father-son relations are protected in the Lancastrian tetralogy and in Julius Caesar, it simultaneously undoes the strategy that protects sexual relations in the romantic comedies: in Hamlet, both kinds of relationship are in effect contaminated by their relocation in the presence of the mother. Maternal absence is as striking in these comedies as in the tetralogy. And if, in the histories, this absence functions to enable the son's assumption of his father's identity, here it functions to protect comic possibility itself by sustaining the illusion that the endlessly appealing girls of the comedies will never become fully sexual women and hence will never lose their androgynous charm: having no mothers, they need not become mothers. Despite the degree to which marriage is the ostentatious goal of Shakespeare's romantic comedies, these plays rarely look forward to the sexual consummation that seals marriage; even A Midsummer Night's Dream does so only in the context of a series of magical protections against danger. The comedies tend rather to deflect attention away from female sexuality through a variety of devices: through a comic closure that defers consummation, through the heroine's sometimes unresolved transvestitism or allusion to the male actor who will remain when the play is over and costumes are removed, even through the insistent cuckoldry jokes—jokes that serve both to deflect the imagined sexual act away from the male wooer.
and to defer it into the indefinite future, where, as Lavatch will say in a different mood, "the knaves come to
do that for me which I am aweary of (All's Well, 1.3.41). The absence of fully imagined female sexuality is, I
think, what enables the holiday tone of these plays; that sexuality is for Shakespeare the stuff of tragedy, not
comedy.

The female sexuality largely absent from the comedies invades Hamlet in the person of Gertrude, and, once
there, it utterly contaminates sexual relationship, disabling holiday. In her presence, Hamlet sees his task as
the disruption of marriage itself: "I say we will have no mo marriage" (3.1.149), he says to Ophelia as she
becomes contaminated in his eyes, subject to the same "frailty" that names his mother. As he comes to
identify himself with his cuckolded father—his "imaginations are as foul / As Vulcan's stithy"
(3.2.83-84)—he can think of Ophelia only as a cuckold-maker, like his mother: "if thou wilt needs marry,
marry a fool; for wise men know well enough what monsters you make of them" (3.1.139-41). Moreover,
Ophelia fuses with Gertrude not only as potential cuckold-maker but also as potential mother:

Get thee to a nunnery. Why, wouldst thou be a breeder of sinners? I am myself indifferent
honest, but yet I could accuse me of such things that it were better my mother had not borne
me. (3.1.121-24)

The implicit logic is: why would you be a breeder of sinners like me? In the gap between "breeder of sinners"
and "I," Gertrude and Ophelia momentarily collapse into one figure. It is no wonder that there can be no more
marriage: Ophelia becomes dangerous to Hamlet insofar as she becomes identified in his mind with the
contaminating maternal body, the mother who has borne him.

Hamlet thus redefines the son's position between two fathers by relocating it in relation to an indiscriminately
sexual maternal body that threatens to annihilate the distinction between the fathers and hence problematizes
the son's paternal identification; at the same time, the play conflates the beloved with this betraying mother,
undoing the strategies that had enabled marriage in the comedies. The intrusion of the adulterous mother thus
disables the solutions of history and comedy as Shakespeare has imagined them; in that sense, her presence
initiates tragedy. But how can we understand the mother whose presence has the capacity to undermine the
accommodations to which Shakespeare had come? Why should the first mother powerfully present in
Shakespeare since the period of his earliest works be portrayed as adulterous? Why should her adulterous
presence coincide with the start of Shakespeare's great tragic period?

Given her centrality in the play, it is striking how little we know about Gertrude; even the extent of her
involvement in the murder of her first husband is left unclear. We may want to hear her shock at Hamlet's
accusation of murder—"Almost as bad, good mother, / As kill a king and marry with his brother"
(3.4.28-29)—as evidence of her innocence; but the text permits us to hear it alternatively as shock either at
being found out or at Hamlet's rudeness. The ghost accuses her at least indirectly of adultery and
incest—Claudius is "that incestuous, that adulterate beast" (1.5.42)—but he neither accuses her of nor
exonerates her from the murder. For the ghost, as for Hamlet, her chief crime is her uncontrolled sexuality;
that is the object of their moral revulsion, a revulsion as intense as anything directed toward the murderer
Claudius. But the Gertrude we see is not quite the Gertrude they see. And when we see her in herself, apart
from their characterizations of her, we tend to see a woman more muddled than actively wicked; even her
famous sensuality is less apparent than her conflicted solicitude both for her new husband and for her son.
She is capable from the beginning of a certain guilty insight into Hamlet's suffering ("I doubt it is no other but
the main, / His father's death and our o'er-hasty marriage" [2.2.56-57]). Insofar as she follows Hamlet's
instructions in reporting his madness to Claudius (3.4.189-90; 4.1.7), she seems to enact every son's scenario
for the good mother, choosing his interests over her husband's. But she may of course believe that he is mad
and think that she is reporting accurately to her husband; certainly her courageous defense of her husband in
their next appearance together—where she bodily restrains Laertes, as 4.5.122 specifies—suggests that she
has not wholly adopted Hamlet's view of Claudius. Here, as elsewhere, the text leaves crucial aspects of her
action and motivation open.\textsuperscript{9} Even her death is not quite her own to define. Is it a suicide designed to keep Hamlet from danger by dying in his place?\textsuperscript{10} She knows that Claudius has prepared the cup for Hamlet, and she shows unusual determination in disobeying Claudius's command not to drink it ("Gertrude, do not drink. / I will, my lord" \cite{5.2.294-95}). In her last moment, her thoughts seem to be all for Hamlet; she cannot spare Claudius even the attention it would take to blame him ("O my dear Hamlet! / The drink, the drink! I am poison'd" \cite{5.2.315-16}.) Muddled, fallible, fully human, she seems ultimately to make the choice that Hamlet would have her make. But even here she does not speak clearly; her character remains relatively closed to us.

The lack of clarity in our impressions of Gertrude contributes, I think, to the sense that the play lacks, in Eliot's famous phrase, an "objective correlative."\textsuperscript{11} For the character of Gertrude as we see it becomes for Hamlet—and for \textit{Hamlet}—the ground for fantasies quite incongruent with it; although she is much less purely innocent than Richard III's mother, like that mother she becomes the carrier of a nightmare that is disjunct from her characterization as a specific figure. This disjunction is, I think, the key to her role in the play and hence to her psychic power: her frailty unleashes for Hamlet, and for Shakespeare, fantasies of maternal malevolence, of maternal spoiling, that are compelling exactly as they are out of proportion to the character we know, exactly as they seem therefore to reiterate infantile fears and desires rather than an adult apprehension of the mother as a separate person.

These fantasies begin to emerge as soon as Hamlet is left alone on stage:

\begin{verbatim}
O that this too too sullied flesh would melt,
Thaw and resolve itself into a dew,
Or that the Everlasting had not fix'd
His canon 'gainst self-slaughter. O God! God!
How weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable
Seem to me all the uses of this world!
Fie on't, ah fie, 'tis an unweeded garden
That grows to seed; things rank and gross in nature
Possess it merely. That it should come to this!
But two months dead . . .
\end{verbatim}

(1.2.129-38)

This soliloquy establishes the initial premises of the play, the psychic conditions that are present even before Hamlet has met with the ghost and has been assigned the insupportable task of vengeance. And what Hamlet tells us in his first words to us is that he feels his own flesh as sullied and wishes to free himself from its contamination by death, that the world has become as stale and unusable to him as his own body, and that he figures all this deadness and staleness and contamination in the image of an unweeded garden gone to seed—figures it, that is, in the familiar language of the fall. And he further tells us that this fall has been caused not by his father's death, as both Claudius and Gertrude seem to assume in their conventional consolations, but by his mother's remarriage,\textsuperscript{12} the "this" he cannot specify for fourteen lines, the "this" that looms over the soliloquy, not quite nameable and yet radically present, making his own flesh—"this . . . flesh"—dirty, disrupting his sense of the ongoing possibility of life even as it disrupts his syntax.

Hamlet's soliloquy is in effect his attempt to locate a point of origin for the staleness of the world and his own pull toward death, and he discovers this point of origin in his mother's body. He tells us that the world has been transformed into an unweeded garden, possessed by things rank and gross, because his mother has remarried. And if the enclosed garden—the garden unpossessed—traditionally figures the Virgin Mother, this garden, full of seed, figures his mother's newly contaminated body: its rank weeds localize what Hamlet will later call the "rank corruption" of her sexuality \cite{3.4.150-51}, the "weeds" that will grow "ranker" if that sexuality is not curbed \cite{3.4.153-54}.\textsuperscript{13} In this highly compacted and psychologized version of the fall, death is
the sexualized mother's legacy to her son: maternal sexuality turns the enclosed garden into the fallen world and brings death into that world by making flesh loathsome.\textsuperscript{14} If Hamlet's father's death is the first sign of mortality, his mother's remarriage records the desire for death in his own sullied flesh. For in the world seen under the aegis of the unweeded garden, the very corporality of flesh marks its contamination: Hamlet persistently associates Claudius's fleshliness with his bloated sexuality—transforming the generalized "fatness of these pursy times" (3.4.155) into the image of the "bloat king" tempting his mother to bed (3.4.184)—as though in its grossness flesh was always rank, its solidness always sullied.\textsuperscript{15}

The opening lines of the soliloquy point, I think, toward a radical confrontation with the sexualized maternal body as the initial premise of tragedy, the fall that brings death into the world: Hamlet in effect rewrites Richard III's sense that he has been spoiled in his mother's womb as the condition of mortality itself. The structure of \textit{Hamlet}—and, I will argue, of the plays that follow from \textit{Hamlet}—is marked by the struggle to escape from this condition, to free the masculine identity of both father and son from its origin in the contaminated maternal body. Hamlet's father's death is devastating to Hamlet—and to Shakespeare—partly, I think, because it returns Hamlet to this body, simultaneously unmaking the basis for the son's differentiation from the mother and the heroic foundation for masculine identity that Shakespeare had achieved in the histories.\textsuperscript{16} As in a dream, the plot-conjunction of father's funeral and mother's remarriage expresses this return: it tells us that the idealized father's absence releases the threat of maternal sexuality, in effect subjecting the son to her annihilating power. But the dream-logic of this plot-conjunction is also reversible; if the father's death leads to the mother's sexualized body, the mother's sexualized body, I will argue, leads to the father's death. For the conjunction of funeral and marriage simultaneously expresses two sentences for the son: both "My idealized father's absence leaves me subject to my mother's overwhelming power," and "The discovery of my mother's sexuality kills my idealized father for me, making him unavailable as the basis for my identity." This fantasy-conjunction thus defines the double task of Hamlet and of Shakespeare in the plays to come: if Hamlet attempts both to remake his mother as an enclosed garden in 3.4 and to separate the father he idealizes from the rank place of corruption, Shakespearean tragedy and romance will persistently work toward the desexualization of the maternal body and the recreation of a bodiless father, untouched by her contamination.

A small psychological allegory at the beginning of the play—the exchange between Horatio and Marcellus about the ghost's disappearance—suggests what is at stake in this double task. The first danger in \textit{Hamlet} is the father's "extravagant and erring spirit" (1.1.159) wandering in the night, the father who is—Horatio tells us—"like a guilty thing" (1.1.153).\textsuperscript{17} As though in a kind of ghostly aubade, this father vanishes at the sound of the cock, who "with his lofty and shrill-sounding throat / Awake[s] the god of day" (1.1.156-57). At the approach of the sun-god, the guilty father is banished; and Marcellus's christianizing expansion of this conjunction explicates his banishment:

\begin{quote}
It faded on the crowing of the cock.
Some say that ever 'gainst that season comes
Wherein our Saviour's birth is celebrated,
This bird of dawning singeth all night long;
And then, they say, no spirit dare stir abroad,
The nights are wholesome, then no planets strike,
No fairy takes, nor witch hath power to charm,
So hallow'd and so gracious is that time.
\end{quote}

(1.1.162-69)

Through an incipient pun, Marcellus transforms the god of day into the Son who makes the night wholesome because he is born from the mother's de-sexualized body; and the dangers he protects against are increasingly identified not only with the father's guilty spirit but with the dark female powers of the night. The sequence
The exchange between Horatio and Marcellus predicts both Hamlet's confrontation with the night-dangers of the female body and the fantasy-solution to that confrontation: it establishes the Son born of a bodiless father and a purified mother as the only antidote to her power. And it specifically predicts Hamlet's need to remake his father as Hyperion, his attempt to find a safe basis for his own identity as son in the father he would remake pure. As though in response to this initial encounter with the impure father, the initial strategy of both Hamlet (in the soliloquy) and Hamlet is to split the father in two, deflecting his guilt onto Claudius and reconstituting him in the form of the bodiless sun-god:

That it should come to this!
But two months dead—nay, not so much, not two—
So excellent a king, that was to this
Hyperion to a satyr. (1.2.137-40)

The identification of Old Hamlet with Hyperion makes him benignly and divinely distant, separate from ordinary genital sexuality and yet immensely potent, his sexual power analogous to God's power to impregnate the Virgin Mother (often imaged as Spirit descending on the sun's rays) and to such Renaissance mythologizings of this theme as the operation of the sun on Chrysogonee's moist body (The Faerie Queene, 3.6.7). Ordinary genital sexuality then becomes the province of Claudius the satyr: below the human, immersed in the body, he becomes everything Hyperion/Old Hamlet is not, and the agent of all ill.

This work of splitting is already implicit in Hamlet's initial image of his mother's body as fallen garden, for that image itself makes a physiologically impossible claim: if Claudius's rank and gross possession now transforms the garden that is the mother's body, then it must not before have been possessed. Insofar as the soliloquy expresses Hamlet's sense of his mother's body as an enclosed garden newly breached, it implies the presence of a formerly unbreached garden; the alternatives that govern Hamlet's imagination of his mother's body are the familiar ones of virgin and whore, closed or open, wholly pure or wholly corrupt. And the insistence that the garden has just been transformed functions to exonerate his father, separating him from his mother's sexualized body: it is the satyr Claudius, not the sun-god father, who has violated the maternal space. Literalized in the plot, the splitting of the father thus evokes the ordinary psychological crisis in which the son discovers the sexuality of his parents, but with the blame handily shifted from father onto another man as unlike father as possible—and yet as like, hence his mother; in effect, the plot itself serves as a cover-up, legitimizing disgust at paternal sexuality without implicating the idealized father. But thus arbitrarily separated, these fathers are always prone to collapse back into one another. The failure to differentiate between Old Hamlet and Claudius is not only Gertrude's: the play frequently insists on their likeness even while positing their absolute difference; for the sexual guilt of the father—his implication in the mother's body—is its premise, its unacknowledged danger. Even Hamlet's attempt to imagine a protective father in the soliloquy returns him to this danger:

So excellent a king, that was to this
Hyperion to a satyr, so loving to my mother
That he might not beteem the winds of heaven
Visit her face too roughly. Heaven and earth,
Must I remember? Why, she would hang on him
As if increase of appetite had grown
By what it fed on; and yet within a month—
Let me not think on't . . .
This image of parental love is so satisfying to Hamlet in part because it seems to enfold his mother safely within his father's protective embrace: by protecting her against the winds of heaven, he simultaneously protects against her, limiting and controlling her dangerous appetite. But as soon as that appetite has been invoked, it destabilizes the image of paternal control, returning Hamlet to the fact of his father's loss: for Gertrude's appetite is always inherently frightening, always potentially out of control; as the image of the unweeded garden itself implied, it has always required a weeder to manage its over-luxuriant growth. The existence of Gertrude's appetite itself threatens the image of the father's godlike control; and in his absence, Gertrude's appetite rages, revealing what had been its potential for voraciousness all along. Having sated herself in a celestial bed, she now preys on garbage (1.5.55-57); and her indifferent voraciousness threatens to undo the gap between then and now, virgin and whore, Hyperion and satyr, on which Hamlet's defensive system depends. Despite the ghost's insistence on the difference, sating oneself in bed and preying on garbage sound suspiciously like the same activity: the imagery of devouring common to both tends to flatten out the distinction. "Could you on this fair mountain leave to feed / And batten on this moor?" Hamlet asks his mother (3.4.66-67), insisting again on a difference that seems largely without substance, inadvertently collapsing the distance between the idealized and the debased versions of Gertrude's appetite and hence between the brothers she feeds on. But in fact the strenuousness of the opposition between them has indicated their resemblance all along: what they have in common is an appetite for Gertrude's appetite; and her appetite can't tell the difference between them.

The ghost's revelation of Gertrude's adultery is horrifying not only because it reveals that she has not been faithful to him—her rapid remarriage has already done that—but also because it threatens to undo the structure of difference that Hamlet has had to maintain in order to keep his father and Claudius apart. For if Gertrude's appetite for the two men is the same, then Old Hamlet is as fully implicated in her sexuality as Claudius. Hence in part Hamlet's shock when he meets the father he has idealized so heavily: when Old Hamlet appears to his son, not in his mind's idealizing eye (1.2.185) but in the dubious form of the ghost, he reveals not only Claudius's but also his own "foul crimes done in [his] days of nature" (1.5.12). The fathers Hamlet tries so strenuously to keep separated keep threatening to collapse into one another; even when he wants to kill one to avenge the other, he cannot quite tell them apart. In 3.3, on his way to his mother's closet, he comes across Claudius praying, a ready-made opportunity for revenge. But knowing that his father has committed foul crimes, and seeing Claudius praying, Hamlet becomes so unsure that there is an essential difference between them that he worries that God might send the wrong man to heaven. Even as he describes Claudius's murder of his father to himself, he conflates it imagistically with his father's crimes: "'A took my father grossly, full of bread, / With all his crimes broad blown, as flush as May" (3.3.80-81). Claudius's and Old Hamlet's crimes become equally broad-blown, as the two sinful fathers merge linguistically: the imagery of the rank garden, of over-luxuriant and swollen growth, has passed from Claudius to Old Hamlet, the "blossoms" of whose sin (1.5.76) are now broad-blown and flush. The highly charged word grossly registers this failure of differentiation: it hovers indeterminately between the two men, attaching itself first to Claudius (Claudius killed Old Hamlet grossly) and then to Old Hamlet (who died in a gross and unsanctified state); and in its indeterminacy, it associates both Claudius and Old Hamlet with the gross possession of Gertrude's unweeded garden. Ultimately Hyperion and the satyr refuse to stay separated, so that Hamlet—and Hamlet—have to do and redo the distinction over and over again. Whatever Hamlet's original intentions in approaching his mother in 3.4, his most immediate need after the crisis of differentiation in 3.3 is to force her to acknowledge the difference between the two fathers ("Hamlet, thou hast thy father much offended. / Mother, you have my father much offended" [3.4.8-9]). But even as he attempts to force this acknowledgment, he repeats the crisis of differentiation in yet another form. He presents her (and us) with two pictures initially indistinguishable and linguistically collapsed into one another: "Look here upon this picture, and on this. / The counterfeit presentment of two brothers" (3.4.53-54). As he begins the work of distinguishing between them all over again, the sense of counterfeit presentment becomes descriptive not only of the portraits as works of art but of his own portraiture, his own need both to present and to counterfeit these
potentially similar false coins. Once again his father becomes a god, with "Hyperion's curls, the front of Jove himself, / An eye like Mars" (3.4.56-57); and Claudius becomes a "mildew'd ear / Blasting his wholesome brother" (3.4.64-65). But his words undermine the distinction he would reinstate: the most significantly contaminated ear in the play belongs to Old Hamlet.

Finally, the myth of his father as Hyperion cannot be sustained; and its collapse returns both father and son to the contaminated maternal body. No longer divinely inseminating, the sun-god becomes deeply implicated in matter in Hamlet's brutal parody of incarnation:

*Ham.* If the sun breed maggots in a dead dog, being a good kissing carrion—Have you a daughter?

*Pol* I have, my lord.

*Ham.* Let her not walk i' th' sun. Conception is a blessing, but as your daughter may conceive—friend, look to't.

(2.2.181-86)\(^{23}\)

Here is male spirit wholly enmeshed in female matter, kissing it, animating it with a vengeance; and—unlike the Son's—this conception is no blessing. If Marcellus's fantasy condenses father and son in a protective dyad, father and son here collapse into one another in their contamination: "Let her not walk i' th' sun," Hamlet warns Polonius; and his bitter pun locates the father-god's contamination in his own flesh. For this conception relocates the son in the dead matter of the unweeded garden: the horrific image of conception as the stirring of maggots in a corpse makes the son himself no more than one of the maggots, simultaneously born from and feeding on death in the maternal body.\(^{24}\)

In the myth of origins bitterly acknowledged here, the son is wedded to death by his conception, spoiled by his origin in the rank flesh of the maternal body; and there is no idealized father to rescue him from this body. This fantasy of spoiling at the site of origin is, I think, the under-text of the play; it emerges first in muted form as Hamlet waits for the appearance of his ghostly father and meditates on the drama of evil that ruins the noble substance of man. When Hamlet hears the drunken revel of Claudius's court, he first fixes blame on Claudius for the sense of contamination he feels: "They clepe us drunkards, and with swinish phrase / Soil our addition" (1.4.19-20). But as he continues, his bodily language rewrites the source of contamination, increasingly relocating it in the female body. "Indeed it takes / From our achievements, though perform'd at height, / The pith and marrow of our attribute" (1.4.20-22): through the imagery, the soiling of the male body—its pith and marrow emptied out at the height of performance—is grotesquely equated with intercourse and its aftermath.\(^{25}\) And this shadowy image of the male body spoiled by the female in intercourse predicts the rest of the speech, where the role of spoiler is taken not by Claudius and his habits but by an unnamed and unspecified female body that corrupts man against his will:

So, oft it chances in particular men  
That for some vicious mole of nature in them,  
As in their birth, wherein they are not guilty  
(Since nature cannot choose his origin),  
. . . these 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.

(1.4.23-36, passim)

As Hamlet imagines man struggling against his one defect—the mark of his bondage to a feminized Nature or Fortune—the origin he cannot choose increasingly becomes not only the site but the agent of corruption. Even as Hamlet unorthodoxly proclaims man not guilty in his birth, that is, he articulates his own version of original sin: here, as in Richard III's fantasy of himself deformed by Nature in his mother's womb (3 Henry VI, 3.2.153-64), man is spoiled in his birth by birth defects not of his own making, and he takes corruption from that particular fault.

Fall/fault/foutre: the complex bilingual pun registers the fantasy that moves under the surface of Hamlet's meditation. For fault allusively collapses the female genitals with the act of intercourse that engendered the baby there, and then collapses both with the fall and original sin; through its punning formulations, original sin becomes literally the sin of origin.27 "Virtue cannot so inoculate our old stock but we shall relish of it" (3.1.117-18): formed and deformed in his mother's womb, man takes his corruption from that particular fault. Hamlet is indeed "to the manner born" (1.4.15), as he says at the start of his meditation: "It were better my mother had not borne me," he tells Ophelia (3.1.123-24); but he is "subject to his birth" (1.3.18).28

This subjection of male to female is, I think, the buried fantasy of Hamlet, the submerged story that it partly conceals and partly reveals; in its shift of contaminating agency from Claudius to the female body as the site of origin, Hamlet's meditation seems to me to be diagnostic of this fantasy. The poisoning of Old Hamlet is ostentatiously modeled on Cain's killing of Abel; Claudius cannot allude to his offense without recalling "the primal eldest curse upon't" (3.3.37). But this version of Cain and Abel turns out in part to be a cover for the even more primal story implicit in the unweeded garden, the prior explanation for the entrance of death into the world: the murder here turns not on the winning of a father's favor but on the body of a woman; and Old Hamlet is poisoned in his orchard-garden (1.5.35; 3.2.255) by the "serpent" who wears his crown (1.5.39).29 On the surface of the text, that is, the story of Adam and Eve has been displaced, the horrific female body at its center occluded: Eve is conspicuously absent from the Cain-and-Abel version of the fall. But if the plot rewrites the fall as a story of fratricidal rivalry, locating literal agency for the murder in Claudius, a whole network of images and associations replaces his literal agency with Gertrude's, replicating Eve in her by making her both the agent and the locus of death. Beneath the story of fratricidal rivalry is the story of the woman who conduces to death, of the father fallen not through his brother's treachery but through his subjection to this woman; and despite Gertrude's conspicuous absence from the scene in the garden, in this psychologized version of the fall, the vulnerability of the father—and hence of the son—to her poison turns out to be the whole story.30

In an astonishing transfer of agency from male to female, malevolent power and blame for the murder tend to pass from Claudius to Gertrude in the deep fantasy of the play.31 We can see the beginnings of this shift of blame even in the Ghost's initial account of the murder, in which the emotional weight shifts rapidly from his excoriation of Claudius to his much more powerful condemnation of Gertrude's sexuality. And in "The Murder of Gonzago," Hamlet's version of his father's tale, the murderer's role is clearly given less emphasis than the Queen's: Lucianus gets a scant six lines, while her protestations of undying love motivate all the preceding dialogue of the playlet. Moreover, while the actual murderer remains a pasteboard villain, the Queen's protestations locate psychic blame for the murder squarely in her. "None wed the second but who kill'd the first," she tells us (3.2.175). In her formulation, remarriage itself is a form of murder: "A second time I kill my husband dead, / When second husband kisses me in bed" (3.2.179-80). We know that Hamlet has added some dozen or sixteen lines to the play (2.2.535), and though we cannot specify them, these protestations seem written suspiciously from the point of view of the child, whose mother's remarriage often seems like her murder of the image of his father. When Hamlet confronts his mother in her closet immediately after his playlet, he confirms that he at least has shifted agency from Claudius to her: his own killing of
Polonius is, he says, "A bloody deed. Almost as bad, good Mother; / As kill a king and marry with his brother" (3.4.28-29). Given the parallel with his killing of Polonius, "as kill a king" first seems to describe Claudius's act; but when the line ends with "brother" rather than "queen" or "wife," the killing attaches itself irrevocably to Gertrude, playing out in miniature the shift of agency from him to her. For Claudius's crime is nearly absent here: in Hamlet's accusation, Claudius becomes the passive victim of Gertrude's sexual will; she becomes the active murderer.

And the play itself is complicit with Hamlet's shift of agency: though the degree of her literal guilt is never specified, in the deep fantasy of the play her sexuality itself becomes akin to murder. The second of the Player Queen's protestations—"A second time I kill my husband dead / When second husband kisses me in bed"—implicitly collapses the two husbands into one and thus makes the equation neatly: when her husband kisses her, she kills him. But this is in fact what one strain in the imagery has been telling us all along. As Lucianus carries the poison onstage in "The Murder of Gonzago," he addresses it in terms that associate it unmistakably with the weeds of that first unweeded garden:

Thou mixture rank, of midnight weeds collected,
With Hecate's ban thrice blasted, thrice infected,
Thy natural magic and dire property
On wholesome life usurps immediately.

(3.2.251-54)

Even as we see him poison the Player-King, the language insists that the poison is not his but hers, its usurpation on wholesome life derivative not from Claudius's political ambitions but from the rank weeds (3.4.153-54) of Gertrude's body. Its "mixture rank" merely condenses and localizes the rank mixture that is sexuality itself; hence the subterranean logic by which the effects of Claudius's poison on Old Hamlet's body replicate the effects of venereal disease, covering his smooth body with the lazarlike tetter, the "vile and loathsome crust" (1.5.71-72) that was one of the diagnostic signs of syphilis.

In Lucianus's words, the poison that kills Old Hamlet becomes less the distillation of a usurping fratricidal rivalry than the distillation of the horrific female body, the night-witch against whom Marcellus had invoked the protection of the Saviour born from a virgin birth; cursed by Hecate, it is in effect the distillation of midnight itself, the "witching time" when "hell itself breathes out / Contagion to this world" (3.2.379-81). The play here invokes the presence of an unbounded nightmare night-body, breathing out the contagion of her poison; and it gives shape to this horrific night-body through a curious and punning repetition. Horatio tells Hamlet that the ghost first appeared "in the dead waste and middle of the night" (1.2.198); and Hamlet repeats his phrase when he questions Rosencranz and Guildenstern about their relations with the lady Fortune:

Ham. Then you live about her waist, or in the middle of her favours?

Guild. Faith, her privates we.

Ham. In the secret parts of Fortune? O, most true! She is a strumpet.

(2.2.232-36)

"Waste" and "waist" coalesce in the dangerous middle of this strumpet; and the idealized father turns out to be horribly vulnerable to the poison of her rank midnight weeds. For however mild-mannered Gertrude may be as a literal character, in fantasy she takes on the aspect of this night-body, herself becoming the embodiment of hell and death: the fires in which Hamlet's father is confined, the fires that burn and purge the foul crimes done in his days of nature (1.5.11-13), merely reproduce the fire of the "rebellious hell" that burns
in her bones (3.4.82-88). In anticipation of Lear's anatomy—"there's hell, there's darkness, / There is the sulphurous pit" (King Lear, 4.6.129-30)—punishment and crime coalesce: death is not only the consequence of sexuality but also its very condition.

This anatomy is in its own way perfectly orthodox; it condenses the story of the fall by making female sexuality itself the locus of death:

Surely her house tendeth to death, & her paths unto the dead. All thei that go unto her, returne not againe, nether take they holde of the waies of life.

For she hathe caused manie to fall downe wounded, and the strong men are all slayne by her. Her house is the waie unto the grave, which goeth downe to the chambers of death.


Every encounter with the "strange woman" of Proverbs—and all women are sexually strangers—is thus a virtual reliving of the fall into mortality. But female sexuality in Hamlet is always maternal sexuality: Gertrude's is the only fully sexualized female body in the play, and we experience her sexuality largely through the imagination of her son. In Hamlet, that is, Shakespeare re-understands the orthodox associations of woman with death by fusing the sexual with the maternal body, reimagining the legacy of death consequent upon the fall as the legacy specifically of the sexualized maternal body. And except in the saving case of the Virgin Mother, the maternal body is always already sexual, corrupted by definition. The mother's body brings death into the world because her body itself is death: in the traditional alignment of spirit and matter, the mother gives us the stuff—the female matter—of our bodies and thus our mortality. Birth itself thus immerses the body in death: hence the power of Hamlet's grotesque version of conception as the stirring of maggots in dead matter. Through this fusion of the sexual with the maternal body and the association of both with death, Shakespeare in effect defamiliarizes the trope of the "womb of earth" (1.1.140): death and sexuality are interchangeable in this psychologized version of the fall because both lead back to this maternal body. Hence also Shakespeare's punning equation of death and the maternal body in his reformulation of the Biblical source of danger: in the deep fantasy of the play, the deadly woman of Proverbs—"thei that go unto her, returne not againe"—is one with Hamlet's "undiscovered country, from whose bourn / No traveller returns" (3.1.79-80).

Both death and sexuality return the traveler to the undiscovered country, familiar and yet utterly foreign, of the maternal body itself; and in Hamlet, this body is always threatening to swallow up her children, to absorb them back within her bourn, undoing their own boundaries. Death itself is a hell-mouth, swallowing Old Hamlet up between its "ponderous and marble jaws" (1.4.50), bringing him and Polonius "not where he eats, but where a is eaten" (4.3.19), where all are subject to "my Lady Worm" (5.1.87); and Gertrude is death's mouth, indiscriminately devouring her husbands "as if increase of appetite had grown / By what it fed on" (1.2.144-45). In this grotesquely oral world, everything is ultimately meat for a single table. Hence I think the slight frisson of horror beneath Hamlet's wit as he describes "the funeral bak'd meats" that "Did coldly furnish forth the marriage tables" (1.2.180-81): we are never sure just what it is that is being consumed in the ceremonies of death and sexual union imagined here. And this momentary confusion is diagnostic of the play's fusion of eating and death and sex: in Hamlet, the turn toward the woman's body is always felt as the return to the devouring maternal womb, with all the potential not only for incestuous nightmare but for total annihilation implied by that return. Hence, I think, the logic of the play's alternative name for poison: "union" (5.2.269, 331). For "union" is just another version of Hecate's "mixture rank," the poison that kills Old Hamlet: each is the poisonous epitome of sexual mixture itself and hence of boundary danger, the terrifying adulteration of male by female that does away with the boundaries between them.
Ham. Farewell, dear mother.

Claud. Thy loving father, Hamlet.

Ham. My mother. Father and mother is man and wife, man and wife is one flesh; so my mother.

(4.3.52-55)

In this fantasy, it does not matter whether Hamlet is thinking of his father or of his incestuous stand-in; all sexuality—licit or illicit—is imagined as an adulterating mixture. And in this rank mixture, the female will always succeed in transforming the male, remaking him in her image, "for the power of beauty will sooner transform honesty from what it is to a bawd than the force of honesty can translate beauty into his likeness" (3.1.111-14). The imagined concourse of male honesty and female beauty ends in the contamination of the male by the female, his translation into a version of her. No wonder Marcellus associates the danger of invasion with the sweaty activity that makes "the night joint-labourer with the day" (1.1.81), obliterating the distinction between the realm of the witch-mother and that of the sungod father; no wonder Hamlet is so intent upon keeping his father's commandment—or perhaps his father himself—all alone within his brain, "unmix'd with baser matter" (1.5.104).39

For Hamlet is ultimately subject to the same adulterating mixture; the sexual anxiety registered through the play's two names for poison, like the incestuous marriage at its center, both covers and expresses a more primitive anxiety about the stability and security of individuating boundaries that finds its focus in Hamlet himself. Promiscuous mixture and boundary contamination everywhere infect this play, from its initial worry about invasion to its final heap of poisoned bodies: in a psychic world where boundaries cannot hold, where the self is invaded, its pales and forts broken down, its pith and marrow extracted, where mother-aunts and uncle-fathers (2.2.372) become indistinguishably one flesh, where even camels become weasels become whales (3.2.367-73), identity itself seems on the point of dissolving or being swallowed up. And the overwhelming use of images of oral contamination and oral annihilation to register these threats to the self suggests their origin in the earliest stages of emergent selfhood, when the nascent self is most fully subject to the mother's fantasied power to annihilate or contaminate. Hence, I think, the centrality of Gertrude: for the play localizes its pervasive boundary panic in Hamlet's relationship with his mother, whose contaminated body initially serves him as the metaphor for the fallen world that has sullied him. And the selfhood that Hamlet constructs in response to this threat becomes the crux of the play: withdrawing himself from the sullying maternal body of the world, Hamlet retreats into what he imagines as an inviolable core of selfhood that cannot be known or played upon (1.2.85; 3.2.355-63), constructing an absolute barrier between inner and outer as though there were no possibility of uncontaminating communication between them; unable to risk crossing this boundary in any creative way, through any significant action in the world, he fantasizes crossing it through magical thinking—imagining the revenge that could come "with wings as swift / As meditation" (1.5.29-30) or through the power of his horrid speech (2.2.557)—or he mimes crossing it from within the extraordinary distance of his withdrawal, taking up a variety of roles not to engage the world but to keep it at bay.40 Hence in part his intense admiration for Horatio, who plays no roles and seems impervious to outer influence, who is "not a pipe for Fortune's finger / To sound what stop she please" (3.2.70-71);41 here as elsewhere, Hamlet figures the threat to (masculine) inner integrity as the sexualized female, aligning it with the strumpet Fortune in whose secret parts corrupt men live (2.2.232-36), as though all such threats were derivative from his unreliable mother's body. But there is no exemption from this body for Hamlet, no pure and unmixed identity for him; like honesty transformed into a bawd, he must eventually see the signs of her rank mixture in himself:

Why, what an ass am I! This is most brave,
That I, the son of a dear father murder'd,
Prompted to my revenge by heaven and hell,
Must like a whore unpack my heart with words
And fall a-cursing like a very drab,
A scullion!

(2.2.578-83)

He himself is subject to his birth: he would imagine himself the unmixed son of an unmixed father, but the whore-mother in him betrays him, returning him to his own mixed origin, his contamination by the sexual female within.42

The first mother to reappear in Shakespeare's plays is adulterous, I think, because maternal origin is in itself felt as equivalent to adulterating betrayal of the male, both father and son; Hamlet initiates the period of Shakespeare's greatest tragedies because it in effect rewrites the story of Cain and Abel as the story of Adam and Eve, relocating masculine identity in the presence of the adulterating female. This rewriting accounts, I think, for Gertrude's odd position in the play, especially for its failure to specify the degree to which she is complicit in the murder. Less powerful as an independent character than as the site for fantasies larger than she is, she is preeminently mother as other, the intimate unknown figure around whom these fantasies swirl. She is kept ambiguously innocent as a character, but in the deep fantasy that structures the play's imagery, she plays out the role of the missing Eve: her body is the garden in which her husband dies, her sexuality the poisonous weeds that kill him, and poison the world—and the self—for her son. This is the psychological fantasy registered by the simultaneity of funeral and marriage: the reappearance of the mother in Hamlet is tantamount to the death of the idealized father because her presence signals his absence, and hence the absence of the son's defense against her rank mixture, her capacity to annihilate or contaminate; as in Marcellus's purifying fantasy, what the idealized father ultimately protects against is the dangerous female powers of the night. The boy-child masters his fear of these powers partly through identification with his father, the paternal presence who has initially helped him to achieve separation from his mother; but if his father fails him—if the father himself seems subject to her—then that protective identification fails. This is exactly the psychological situation at the beginning of Hamlet, where Hamlet's father has become unavailable to him, not only through the fact of his death but through the complex vulnerability that his death demonstrates. This father cannot protect his son; and his disappearance in effect throws Hamlet into the domain of the engulfing mother, awakening all the fears incident to the primary mother-child bond. Here as in Shakespeare's later plays, the loss of the father turns out in fact to mean the psychic domination of the mother: in the end, it is the specter of his mother, not his uncle-father, who paralyzes his will. The Queen, the Queen's to blame.

This shift of agency and of danger from male to female seems to me characteristic of the fantasy-structure of Hamlet and of Shakespeare's imagination in the plays that follow. The ghost's initial injunction sets as the prime business of the play the killing of Claudius; he specifically asks Hamlet to leave his mother alone, beset only by the thorns of conscience (1.5.85-87). But if Gertrude rather than Claudius is to blame, then Hamlet's fundamental task shifts; simple revenge is no longer the issue. Despite his ostensible agenda of revenge, the main psychological task that Hamlet seems to set himself is not to avenge his father's death but to remake his mother:43 to remake her in the image of the Virgin Mother who could guarantee his father's purity, and his own, repairing the boundaries of his selfhood. Throughout the play, the covert drama of reformation vies for priority with the overt drama of revenge, in fact displacing it both from what we see of Hamlet's consciousness and from center stage of the play: when Hamlet accuses himself of lack of purpose (3.4.107-10), of failing to remember his father's business of revenge (4.4.40), he may in part be right.

Even as an avenger, Hamlet seems motivated more by his mother than by his father: when he describes Claudius to Horatio as "he that hath kill'd my king and whor'd my mother" (5.2.64), the second phrase clearly carries more intimate emotional weight than the first. And he manages to achieve his revenge only when he
can avenge his mother's death, not his father's: just where we might expect some version of "rest, perturbed spirit" to link his killing of Claudius with his father's initial injunction, we get "Is thy union here? / Follow my mother" (5.2.331-32).

This shift—from avenging the father to saving the mother—accounts in part for certain peculiarities about this play as a revenge play: why, for example, the murderer is given so little attention in the device ostensibly designed to catch his conscience, why the confrontation of Hamlet with Gertrude in the closet scene seems much more central, much more vivid, than any confrontation between Hamlet and Claudius. Once we look at "The Murder of Gonzago" for what it is, rather than for what Hamlet tells us it is, it becomes clear that the playlet is in fact designed to catch the conscience of the queen: its challenge is always to her loving posture, its accusation "A second time I kill my husband dead / When second husband kisses me in bed." The confrontation with Gertrude (3.4) follows so naturally from this attempt to catch her conscience that Hamlet's unexpected meeting with Claudius (3.3) feels to us like an interruption of a more fundamental purpose. Indeed, Shakespeare stages 3.3 very much as an interruption: Hamlet comes upon Claudius praying as he is on his way to his mother's closet, worrying about the extent to which he can repudiate the Nero in himself; and we come upon Claudius unexpectedly in the same way. That is: the moment that should be the apex of the revenge plot—the potential confrontation alone of the avenger and his prey—becomes for the audience and for the avenger himself a lapse, an interlude that must be gotten over before the real business can be attended to. It is no wonder that Hamlet cannot kill Claudius here: to do so would be to make of the interlude a permanent interruption of his more fundamental purpose. Not even Hamlet could reasonably expect to manage his mother's moral reclamation immediately after he has killed her husband.

Nor would that avenging death regain the mother whom Hamlet needs: once his mother has been revealed as the fallen and possessed garden, she can be purified only by being separated from her sexuality. This separation is in fact Hamlet's effort throughout 3.4. In that confrontation, Hamlet first insists that Gertrude acknowledge the difference between Claudius and Old Hamlet, the difference her adultery and remarriage had undermined. But after the initial display of portraits, Hamlet attempts to induce in her revulsion not at her choice of the wrong man but at her sexuality itself, the rebellious hell that mutines in her matron's bones (3.4.82-83), the "rank corruption, mining all within" (3.4.150). Here, as in the play within the play, Hamlet recreates obsessively, voyeuristically, the acts that have corrupted the royal bed, even when he has to subject his logic and syntax to considerable strain to do so:

Collector What shall I do?
Ham. Not this, by no means, that I bid you do:
Let the bloat King tempt you again to bed,
Pinch wanton on your cheek, call you his mouse,
And let him, for a pair of reechy kisses,
Or paddling in your neck with his damn'd fingers,
Make you to ravel all this matter out
That I essentially am not in madness,
But mad in craft.

(3.4.182-90)

There has to be an easier way of asking your mother not to reveal that your madness is an act. "Not this, by no means, that I bid you do": Hamlet cannot stop imagining, even commanding, the sexual act that he wants to undo. Moreover, the bloated body of this particular king is not particular to him: it is the sexualized male body, its act any sexual act. The royal bed of Denmark is always already corrupted, already a couch for luxury, as Hamlet's own presence testifies. "Go not to my uncle's bed" (3.4.161), Hamlet tells his mother; but his disgust at the incestuous liaison rationalizes a prior disgust at all sexual concourse, as his attempt to end the specifically incestuous union rationalizes an attempt to remake his mother pure by divorcing her from her...
sexuality.

Act 3 scene 4 records Hamlet's attempt to achieve this divorce, to recover the fantasied presence of the asexual mother of childhood, the mother who can restore the sense of sanctity to the world her sexuality has spoiled: his first and last word in the scene is "mother" (3.4.7; 3.4.219). And in his own mind at least, Hamlet does seem to achieve this recovery. He begins the scene by wishing that Gertrude were not his mother ("would it were not so, you are my mother" [3.4.15]); but toward the end, he is able to imagine her as the mother from whom he would beg—and receive—blessing:

Once more, good night,
And when you are desirous to be blest,
I'll blessing beg of you.

(3.4.172-74)

This mother can bless Hamlet only insofar as she herself asks to be blessed by him, signaling her conversion from husband to son and inverting the relation of parent and child; Hamlet is very much in charge even as he imagines asking for maternal blessing. Nonetheless, coming near the end of Hamlet's long scene of rage and disgust, these lines seem to me extraordinarily moving in their evocation of desire for the maternal presence that can restore the sense of the world and the self as blessed. And the blessedness they image is specifically in the relation of world and self: as mother and son mirror each other, each blessing each, Shakespeare images the reopening of the zone of trust that had been foreclosed by the annihilating mother. For the first time, Hamlet imagines something coming to him from outside himself that will neither invade nor contaminate him: the recovery of benign maternal presence for a moment repairs the damage of the fall in him, making safe the boundary-permeability that had been a source of terror. Toward the end of the scene, all those night-terrors are gone: Hamlet's repeated variations on the conventional phrase "good night" mark his progression from rage at his mother's sexuality to repositioning of the good mother he had lost. He begins with "Good night. But go not to my uncle's bed. . . . Refraintonight" (3.4.161, 167), attempting to separate her from her horrific night-body; but by the end—through his own version of Marcellus's purifying fantasy—he has succeeded in imagining both her and the night wholesome. If he begins by wishing Gertrude were not his mother, he ends with the poignant repeated leave-taking of a child who does not want to let go of the mother who now keeps him safe: "Once more, good night . . . So again, good night. . . . Mother, good night indeed. . . .Good night, mother" (3.4.172, 179, 215, 219).

In the end, we do not know whether or not Gertrude herself has been morally reclaimed; it is the mark of the play's investment in Hamlet's fantasies that, even here, we are not allowed to see her as a separate person. To the extent that she looks into the heart that Hamlet has "cleft in twain" (3.4.158) and finds the "black and grained spots" (3.4.90) that he sees there, she seems to accept his version of her soiled inner body; in any case, her response allows him to think of his initial Nero-like aggression—speaking daggers though using none (3.2.387)—as moral reclamation. But as usual in this play, she remains relatively opaque, more a screen for Hamlet's fantasies about her than a fully developed character in her own right: whatever individuality she might have had is sacrificed to her status as mother. Nonetheless, though we might wonder just what his evidence is, Hamlet at least believes that she has returned to him as the mother he can call "good lady" (3.4.182). And after 3.4, her remaining actions are ambiguous enough to nourish his fantasy: though there are no obvious signs of separation from Claudius in her exchanges with him, in her last moments she seems to become a wonderfully homey presence for her son, newly available to him as the loving and protective mother of childhood, worrying about his condition, wiping his face as he fights, even perhaps intentionally drinking the poison intended for him.

In the end, whatever her motivation, he seems securely possessed of her as an internal good mother; and this possession gives him a new calm about his place in the world and especially about death, that domain of
maternal dread. Trusting her, he can begin to trust in himself and in his own capacity for action; and he can begin to rebuild the masculine identity spoiled by her contamination. For his secure internal possession of her idealized image permits the return of his father to him, and in the form that he had always wanted: turning his mother away from Claudius, Hamlet wins her not only for himself but also for his father—for his father conceived as Hyperion, the bodiless godlike figure he had invoked at the beginning of the play. If her sexuality had spoiled this father, her purification brings him back; after 3.4, the guilty father and his ghost disappear, replaced by the distant heavenly father into whom he has been transformed, the one now acting through the sign of the other: "Why, even in that was heaven ordinant. / I had my father's signet in my purse" (5.2.48-49). Unexpectedly finding this sign of the father on his own person, Hamlet in effect registers his repossessing of the idealized father within; and, like a good son, Hamlet can finally merge himself with this father, making His will his own. But though we may feel that Hamlet has achieved a new calm and self-possession, the price is high: for the parents lost to him at the beginning of the play can be restored only insofar as they are entirely separated from their sexual bodies. This is a pyrrhic solution to the problems of embodiedness and familial identity; it does not bode well for Shakespeare's representation of sexual union, or of the children born of that union.

In creating for Hamlet a plot in which his mother's sexuality is literally the sign of her betrayal and of her husband's death, Shakespeare recapitulates the material of infantile fantasy, playing it out with a compelling plot logic that allows its expression in a perfectly rationalized, hence justified, way. Given Hamlet's world, anyone would feel as Hamlet does—but Shakespeare has given him this world. And the world Shakespeare gives him sets the stage for the plays that follow: from Hamlet on, all sexual relationships will be tinged by the threat of the mother, all masculine identity problematically formed in relationship to her. For despite Hamlet's tenuous recovery of his father's signet ring through the workings of Providence, the stabilizing father lost at the beginning of Hamlet—the father who can control female appetite, who can secure pure masculine identity for his son—cannot be brought back from the dead; the ambiguities that attend the bodiless father-Duke of Measure for Measure merely serve to make paternal absence visible, underscoring at once the need for his control over the sexuality that boils and bubbles like a witch's cauldron in Vienna and the desperate fictitiousness of that control. The plays that follow Hamlet enact and re-enact paternal absence in shadowy and fragmentary form—in the sick king of All's Well, in Lear's abdication, in the murder of Duncan, the fatherlessness of Coriolanus, the weakness of Cymbeline; and they thrust the son into the domain of maternal dread inhabited by all the avatars of strumpet fortune—the wicked wives, lovers, daughters, mothers and stepmothers, the witches and engulfing storms—that have the power to shake his manhood (King Lear, 1.4.306).

The central elements of the fantasy of maternal power in Hamlet will recur in a variety of forms, with first one and then another becoming most prominent; they will sometimes be the psychic property of a single character from whom Shakespeare distances himself, and sometimes find embodiment in the play as a whole in ways that suggest Shakespeare's complicity in them. Despite Shakespeare's sometimes astonishing moments of sympathetic engagement with his female characters, his ability to see the world from their point of view, his women will tend to be like Gertrude, more significant as screens for male fantasy than as independent characters making their own claim to dramatic reality; as they become fused with the mother of infantile need, even their fantasized gestures of independence will be read as the signs of adulterous betrayal. And the women will pay heavily for the fantasies—both of destruction and of cure—invested in them. For their sexual bodies will always be dangerous, the sign of the fall and original sin, the "disease that's in my flesh" (King Lear, 2.4.224), "the imposition . . . / Hereditary ours" (The Winter's Tale, 1.2.74-75): as they enter into sexuality, the virgins—Cressida, Desdemona, Imogen—will be transformed into whores, their whoredom acted out in the imaginations of their nearest and dearest; and the primary antidote to their power will be the excision of their sexual bodies, the terrible revirginations that Othello performs on Desdemona, and Shakespeare on Cordelia. For the emergence of the annihilating mother in Hamlet will call forth a series of strategies for confining or converting her power. Hamlet's desire for the return of the virgin mother who can bless him, undoing the effects of the fall, will be played out in Cordelia's return to Lear, Thaisa's return to
Pericles, Hermione's return to Leontes, each of whom must first suffer for her participation in sexuality. And in the absence of these purified figures, parthenogenetic fantasies of exemption from the "woman's part" (Cymbeline, 2.4.174) will seem to offer protection against maternal malevolence. Enunciating his desire to "stand / As if a man were author of himself / And knew no other kin" (Coriolanus, 5.3.35-37), Coriolanus speaks for all those who would not be born of woman (Macbeth, 4.1.80), undoing the subjection to birth that Hamlet discovered in himself. But the problematic maternal body can never quite be occluded or transformed: made into a monster or a saint, killed off or banished from the stage, it remains at the center of masculine subjectivity, marking its unstable origin. For the contaminated flesh of the maternal body is also home: the home Shakespeare's protagonists long to return to, the home they can never quite escape.

Notes

1 My sense of the shape of Shakespeare's career and of the defensive construction of both the comedies and the histories is deeply indebted to Richard P. Wheeler; see Shakespeare's Development and the Problem Comedies (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), esp. pp. 46-50, 155-64.

2 Shakespeare generalizes this guilt by suppressing the rumor that Brutus was Caesar's illegitimate son; 2 Henry VI testifies to his knowledge of it ("Brutus' bastard hand / Stabbed Julius Caesar," 4.1.137-38). Hamlet has often been understood as a reworking of the father-son conflict in the histories and Julius Caesar; see, for example, Norman Holland (Psychoanalysis and Shakespeare [New York: Octagon Books, 1979], pp. 286-87) and C. L. Barber and Richard P. Wheeler (The Whole Journey: Shakespeare's Power of Development [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986], esp. pp. 11-12, 236-38). For the relationship between Hamlet and Julius Caesar, see also Ernest Jones (Hamlet and Oedipus [Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1954], pp. 137-40); for that between Hamlet and the Henriad, see also Peter Erickson (Patriarchal Structures in Shakespeare's Drama [Berkeley: University of California, 1985], pp. 63-67), Wheeler (Shakespeare's Development and the Problem Comedies, pp. 161, 190-91), and Linda Bamber (Comic Women, Tragic Men [Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 1982], pp. 154-58). Though these accounts all acknowledge the eroticizing presence of women in Hamlet, they do not all emphasize the significance of that presence; in this emphasis, my account is closest to Wheeler and to Bamber, for whom tragedy turns on the encounter with woman as Other.

3 See René Girard ("Hamlet's Dull Revenge," in Literary Theory/Renaissance Texts, ed. Patricia Parker and David Quint [Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986], pp. 280-302) and especially Joel Fineman ("Fratricide and Cuckoldry: Shakespeare's Doubles," in Representing Shakespeare, ed. Murray M. Schwartz and Coppélia Kahn [Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980], pp. 86-91) for the threat of collapse into No Difference. In Girard's reading, Old Hamlet and Claudius are the enemy twins between whom there is never any difference; Hamlet consequently has to try to make a difference where none exists and then to fire up his dull revenge mimetically when that difference cannot be sustained. Girard locates the no-difference in his myth of sacralizing violence; like most psychoanalytically oriented critics, I locate it in the common origin of both Old Hamlet and Claudius in the ambivalently regarded father of childhood. Though based in Girard, Fineman's account seems to me both richer and more far-reaching than his, in part because he engages with the "drama of individuation" through which Shakespeare represents the failed myth of differentiation and hence with misogyny as an expression of the fear of No Difference; in his account, as in mine, Gertrude's sexuality becomes the mark of No Difference.

4 This is the likeness registered stunningly, for example, in Hamlet's "How stand I then, / That have a father kill'd, a mother stain'd" (4.4.56-57), where have can indicate either possession or action. This likeness is the staple of most oedipal readings of the play, in which—in Ernest Jones's formulation—Claudius "incorporates the deepest and most buried part of [Hamlet's] own personality" (Hamlet and Oedipus, p. 100); see Holland's useful discussion of this and other oedipal readings (Psychoanalysis and Shakespeare, pp. 163-206). These readings have been extended and challenged by Avi Erlich (Hamlet's Absent Father [Princeton, N.J.]:
Princeton University Press, 1977), who sees the basic motive of the play not in Hamlet's covert identification with Claudius but in his desperate need for a strong father who can protect him from his own incestuous impulses and from the castrating mother they would lead to: "Much more than he wants to have killed his father, Hamlet wants his father back" (p. 260). Although most oedipal accounts begin by acknowledging that Hamlet is initially more obsessed with his mother's remarriage than with his father's death, they usually go on to focus on the father-son relationship, discussing the mother merely as the condition that occasions the son's struggle with—or need for—his father (but see Irving I. Edgar, Shakespeare, Medicine and Psychiatry [London: Vision, 1971], pp. 288-311, for an exception). Without entirely discounting oedipal motives in the play, I want to restore what seems to me the mother's clear primacy in her son's imagination; I consequently emphasize preoedipal motives, in which fantasies of merger with and annihilation by the mother are prior to genital desire for her, and in which the strong father is needed more as an aid to differentiation and the establishment of masculine identity than as a superego protecting against incestuous desire. The extraordinary oral valence of both sex and killing in Hamlet—the extent to which both are registered in the language of eating and boundary diffusion—seems to me evidence of the extent to which even the more purely oedipal issues are strongly colored by preoedipal anxiety. My emphasis on Gertrude has to some extent been anticipated by those who stress matricidal impulses in the play, implicitly or explicitly making Orestes—rather than Oedipus—the model for Hamlet; see, for example, Gilbert Murray (Hamlet and Orestes, [London: Oxford University Press, 1914]), Frederic Wertham ("The Matricidal Impulse: Critique of Freud's Interpretation of Hamlet," Journal of Criminal Psychopathology 2 [1941]: 455-64), J. M. Moloney and L. Rockelein ("A New Interpretation of Hamlet," International Journal of Psychoanalysis 30 [1949]: 92-107), Harry Levin (The Question of Hamlet [New York: Oxford University Press, 1959], p. 65), Theodore Lidz (Hamlet's Enemy, [London: Vision, 1975]), and Maurice Charney ("The 'Now Could I Drink Hot Blood' Soliloquy and the Middle of Hamlet," Mosaic 10 [1977]: 77-86). Jones (pp. 106-7), Edgar (pp. 294-98) and Erlich (p. 152) see matricidal rage primarily as a derivative of oedipal desire; in the accounts of Moloney and Rockelein (pp. 99, 106) and of Lidz (pp. 183, 231), it is also derived—at least incipiently—from the relationship to the overwhelming preoedipal mother. For more explicitly preoedipal readings of Hamlet, see, for example, accounts of the play's oedipal issues as covers for preoedipal masochism (Edmund Bergler, "The Seven Paradoxes in Shakespeare's Hamlet," American Imago 16 [1959]: 379-405) or narcissism (Kaja Silverman, "Hamlet and the Common Theme of Fathers," Enclitic 3 [1979]: 106-21), or of Hamlet's sarcasm as oral aggression (M. D. Faber, "Hamlet, Sarcasm, and Psychoanalysis," Psychoanalytic Review 58 [1968]: 79-90); see especially Wheeler's account of Hamlet's attempt to build a self both by incorporating the image of an ideal father and by recovering the trust shattered by disillusionment with his mother (Shakespeare's Development and the Problem Comedies, pp. 161, 190-200). Although I share many details of interpretation with Avi Erlich, whose work I learned from and reacted against in my earliest days at Berkeley, my account of the play is most deeply indebted to Wheeler's.


Others note that her involvement—particularly in comparison with the sources—is left ambiguous (see, e.g., William Empson, "Hamlet When New," *The Sewanee Review* 61 [1953]: 37, and Lidz, *Hamlet’s Enemy*, pp. 78, 81); and at least one critic is sure that she knows of the murder (Richard Flatter, *Hamlet’s Father* [New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1949], pp. 30-31, 59-80, and 153-60).

7 Ever since Joseph (Conscience and the King, pp. 17-8) pointed out that "adulterate" in Shakespeare’s time could apply to sexual sin generally, not just to what we moderns narrowly call adultery, critics have cautioned against assuming that Gertrude and Claudius were adulterous in our sense (see, e.g., Putzel, "Queen Gertrude’s Crime," p. 39; Smith, "A Heart Cleft in Twain," pp. 209-10, n. 11; and Frye, The Renaissance "Hamlet", p. 323). But the definitions Joseph cites all seem to add a more inclusive definition to a word more commonly—or, as the homily Against Whoredom and Uncleanness puts it, "properly"—understood in the narrower sense (Joseph, p. 17); and the ghost’s emphasis on the marriage vow (1.5.49) suggests that Gertrude’s crime was specifically against marriage. As usual with Gertrude, the matter is far from settled.

8 See Smith’s fine discussion of the discrepancy between the monstrously sensual Gertrude portrayed by Hamlet, the ghost, and many critics, and the "careful mother and wife" Gertrude appears to be in her brief appearances on stage ("A Heart Cleft in Twain," pp. 194-201); R. A. Foakes notes specifically that Hamlet’s attack in 3.4 "proceeds more from his imagination than from anything the audience has seen or heard" ("Character and Speech in ‘Hamlet,’” in *Shakespeare Institute Studies: Hamlet*, ed. John Russell Brown and Bernard Harris [New York: Schocken Books, 1963], p. 158). For G. Wilson Knight, this discrepancy illustrates the degree to which our judgment is independent of Hamlet’s ("The Embassy of Death," in *The Wheel of Fire* [New York: Meridian Books, 1957], pp. 32, 43-44). But in Linda Bamber’s reading of misogyny as a consequence of the tragic hero’s decentering confrontation with the Other, Gertrude is simply "a vessel for Hamlet's feelings," not an independent character in whom we have an investment; since we "adopt his feelings as long as he displays them," we think of her as vaguely redeemed once he has given up his sexual disgust (*Comic Women, Tragic Men*, pp. 72-83). While I largely concur in Bamber’s assessment, I note that the generations of critics who have struggled to define Gertrude suggest that the play promotes some investment in her; her ambiguous status as Other seems to me the mark of Shakespeare’s ambiguous investment in the fantasies localized in Hamlet.

9 Bradley (Shakespearean Tragedy, p. 137), Joseph (Conscience and the King, pp. 96-97), and Putzel ("Queen Gertrude’s Crime," p. 43) think that Gertrude repents and gives her allegiance to Hamlet; Eleanor Prosser (Hamlet and Revenge [Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1967], p. 196), Baldwin Maxwell ("Hamlet’s Mother," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 15 [1964]: 242), and Smith ("A Heart Cleft in Twain," p. 205) think that she is unchanged.

10 Gertrude drinks the cup knowingly in Olivier’s *Hamlet*.

11 T. S. Eliot, "Hamlet," *Selected Essays* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1932), p. 124. In Eliot’s view, the discrepancy between Gertrude and the disgust she arouses in Hamlet is the mark of "some stuff that the writer could not drag to light, contemplate, or manipulate into art" (p. 123) and hence of artistic failure; but, in concluding that Gertrude needs to be insignificant to arouse in Hamlet "the feeling which she is incapable of representing" (p. 125), he inadvertently suggests the aesthetic power of fantasy disengaged from its adequate representation in a single character. For a brilliant analysis of the way in which the feminine stands for the failure of all kinds of representational stability in Eliot’s aesthetic, in various psychoanalytic attempts to master the play, and in *Hamlet* itself as the representative of Western tradition, see Jacqueline Rose, "Hamlet—the Mona Lisa of Literature," *Critical Quarterly* 28 (1986): 35-49.

12 Critics of all sorts agree that Gertrude’s remarriage disturbs Hamlet more profoundly than his father’s death: in addition to the "Orestes" and preoedipal critics cited in note 4, see, for example, Bradley (Shakespearean Tragedy, p. 101), Eliot ("Hamlet," p. 123), Wilson (What Happens in Hamlet?, pp. 42-43), Jones (Hamlet and
Oedipus, p. 68), Granville-Barker (Prefaces to Shakespeare, pp. 94-95), Flatter (Hamlet's Father, pp. 62-63), and Smith ("A Heart Cleft in Twain," p. 197). For the opposing point of view, see, e.g., Arthur Kirsch's account of Hamlet's impeded work of mourning, in which Hamlet's father's death has explanatory primacy ("Hamlet's Grief," English Literary History 48 [1981]: 17-36). Though Kirsch refers to Freud's "Mourning and Melancholia," he does not foreground the ambivalence toward the lost and introjected object that is the crux of that essay; this ambivalence toward the father is at the center of Barber and Wheeler's account of the play (The Whole Journey, p. 254).

13 Rank is evocative of sexual disgust in Hamlet and elsewhere in Shakespeare: Claudius's offense is "rank" (3.3.36); he and Gertrude live "in the rank sweat of an enameled bed, / Stew'd in corruption" (3.4.92-93). For other uses of rank, see, for example, Desdemona's "will most rank" (Othello, 3.3.236) or Posthumus's description of the woman's part ("lust, and rank thoughts, hers, hers," Cymbeline, 2.4.176). Burgundy describes a France "corrupting in it own fertility," in which "the even mead . . . / Wanting the scythe, all uncorrected, rank, / Conceives by idleness" (Henry V, 5.2.40, 48-51); in its depiction of a monstrous female fecundity that is out of control, his "rank" is very close to Hamlet's unweeded garden. In his fine early discussion of the stench of corrupting flesh pervasive in Hamlet, Richard D. Altick notes the association of rank specifically with the smell of sexuality ("Hamlet and the Odor of Mortality," Shakespeare Quarterly 5 [1954]: 173-4).

14 Hamlet's sexual disgust and allied hatred of the flesh have been widely recognized; see, for example, Knight (The Wheel of Fire, p. 23), Prosser (Hamlet and Revenge, p. 175), and especially L. C. Knights ("Prince Hamlet," Scrutiny 9 [1940-41]: 151; An Approach to "Hamlet" [London: Chatto and Windus, 1960], esp. pp. 50-60). Most trace his recoil from the flesh to his shock at his mother's sensuality: "Is he not . . . her very flesh and blood?" Granville-Barker asks (Prefaces to Shakespeare, p. 235; see also, e.g., Wilson, What Happens in Hamlet?, p. 42; Knights, An Approach to "Hamlet", p. 60; and Karl P. Wentersdorf, "Animal Symbolism in Shakespeare's Hamlet: The Imagery of Sex Nausea," Comparative Drama 17 [1983-84]: 375); in some ways my reading of Hamlet is an attempt to unfold the implications of Granville-Barker's question. For Jones, as for most oedipal critics, this recoil comes more indirectly from his mother: it is Hamlet's defensive response to the incestuous desire her remarriage fosters in him (Hamlet and Oedipus, pp. 88-89, 95). But John Hunt sees the source of Hamlet's contempt for the body not in his mother but in the ghost, the "memento of all that rots" ("A Thing of Nothing: The Catastrophic Body in Hamlet," Shakespeare Quarterly 39 [1988]: 32-35).

15 After giving the reasons for preferring Quarto 1 and 2's "sallied" (= sullied) to Folio's "solid," Jenkins concedes that Shakespeare may have intended a pun (see Arden Hamlet, pp. 436-37).

16 In Bamber's formulation, "What we see in Hamlet is not the Oedipal drama itself but the unraveling of the resolution to the Oedipus complex" (Comic Women, Tragic Men, p. 156); Rose understands femininity as the scapegoated sign of this unraveling ("Hamlet—the Mona Lisa of Literature," esp. pp. 40-41, 46-47). Traditional Freudian theory locates the father's protective function at the point of this resolution (see, for example, Erlich's account of Hamlet's fantasy-search for the father who can protect him from his own incestuous impulses [Hamlet's Absent Father, esp. pp. 23-37, 185-94]). But in object-relations theory, the father's protective role comes much earlier, when he helps the son in the process of differentiation from the potentially overwhelming mother of infancy (see, e.g., Nancy Chodorow, The Reproduction of Mothering [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978], pp. 71, 79-82; the father's role in the process of individuation was first pointed out to me by Dr. Malcolm Pines at a meeting of the British Psychoanalytical Society in 1977). Both sorts of paternal protection seem to me to be lost at the beginning of Hamlet; but the distinctly oral valence of the unraveling of the oedipal resolution here (see note 4, above) suggests the primacy of the earlier crisis in the play's structuring fantasy.
The sense that Old Hamlet is somehow guilty has been most vigorously registered through the suspicion that the ghost is up to no good, that he is—as Protestant theology would insist and as Hamlet himself suspects when it is convenient for him to do so—a diabolic agent conducing to damnation. (The classic account of this view is Prosser's *Hamlet and Revenge*; in my view, it has been largely refuted by those who insist on the ghost's mixed nature [e.g., Charles A. Hallet and Elaine S. Hallet, *The Revenger's Madness: A Study of Revenge Tragedy Motifs* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1980), pp. 184-89] and on the extent to which his nature is deliberately left ambiguous [e.g., Robert H. West, *Shakespeare and the Outer Mystery* (Lexington: University of Kentucky, 1968), pp. 56-68] and Frye, *The Renaissance "Hamlet"*, pp. 14-29).

See Erlich's similar reading of this passage as expressing the wish for a nonsexual birth that can defend against female danger (*Hamlet's Absent Father*, pp. 201-4). Though they do not specifically allude to this passage, Barber's and Wheeler's comments on the transformation of religious need into tragic theater are, I think, especially pertinent to the filial identity imaged through it: "The play is a version of the family romance of which Jesus's conviction that he is the son of God, that 'My father and I are one,' is the ultimate extreme" (*The Whole Journey*, p. 29).

The place of this dream-technique in the creation of Old Hamlet and Claudius was identified by Jones (*Hamlet and Oedipus*, p. 138) and Maud Bodkin (*Archetypal Patterns in Poetry* [London: Oxford University Press, 1934], pp. 13-14) and has since been widely accepted by psychoanalytic critics; see especially Barber and Wheeler's account of its devastating effects on the son who thus loses the capacity to move toward independent adulthood by coming to terms with his father's imperfections (*The Whole Journey*, pp. 249, 254-55). The over-idealized father must be destructive to Hamlet's own selfhood (see Wheeler, *Shakespeare's Development*, pp. 143, 193-94); in discussing Hamlet's need to escape "from the shade of the dead hero," Levin strikingly anticipates more recent formulations of the problem (*The Question of Hamlet*, pp. 57-58).

Critics often note that Old Hamlet's crimes seem to be of the same kind as Claudius's (see, for example, Rebecca West, *The Court and the Castle* [New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1957], pp. 27-28; P. J. Aldus, *Mousetrap: Structure and Meaning in "Hamlet"* [Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977], pp. 47-48; David Leverenz, "The Woman in Hamlet: An Interpersonal View," in *Representing Shakespeare*, p. 117; and Margaret W. Ferguson, "Hamlet: Letters and Spirits," in *Shakespeare and the Question of Theory*, ed. Patricia Parker and Geoffrey Hartman [New York: Methuen, 1985], pp. 296-97); the recent mini-tradition of doubling the roles of Claudius and the ghost seems to respond to this likeness (see Ralph Berry, "Hamlet's Doubles," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 37 [1986]: 209-10). But critics like West or Girard (see note 3, above) who begin by noting the likeness seem to me to obscure its force: the shock of noticing the likeness works on us, I think, only if we have first accepted the difference between them; the play thus replicates in its audience the disillusionment Hamlet continually tries to defer.

Elizabeth Abel first called my attention to the implicit presence of a controlling male gardener in Hamlet's image; since she has been a great help to me at virtually every stage of this book, it is a particular pleasure to record this specific debt to her. The father's place in controlling the mother's sexuality for the (oedipal) son is familiar in psychoanalysis; see, e.g., Lidz (*Hamlet's Enemy*, pp. 54, 83). Rose forcefully poses the broader social question this formulation partly occludes: "What happens . . . to the sexuality of the woman, when the husband dies, who is there to hold its potentially dangerous excess within the bounds of a fully social constraint?" (*Hamlet—the Mona Lisa of Literature,* pp. 38-39).

Given my reading of this passage, Warburton's famous emendation of *good* to *god* is nearly irresistible; but I have nonetheless resisted it, staying with the Arden's *good* on the grounds that the word does not, strictly speaking, require emendation.

According to John E. Hankins, Hamlet is quite orthodox here; see his account of the Aristotelian and post-Aristotelian theories that made generation of all kinds dependent on putrifying matter ("Hamlet's 'God Kissing Carrion': A Theory of the Generation of Life," *PMLA* 64 [1949]: 507-16).

"Marrow" is unusual in Shakespeare; three of its four other occurrences are in a sexual context (see *All's Well*, where Parolles cautions Bertram against "spending his manly marrow" in the arms of his kickywicky [2.3.276-77]; see also "Venus and Adonis," 1. 142, and *3 Henry VI*, 3.2.125).

See John H. Astington, "'Fault' in Shakespeare," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 36 (1985): 330-4, for *fault* as a slang term for the female genitals; he does not note its use in this passage. But *fault* could apparently carry the more general suggestion of sexual intercourse as well: as the language lesson in *Henry V* makes clear, French *foutre* was available to corrupt good English words (3.4.47-49), and Shakespeare routinely takes advantage of this potentiality in his use of *fault*. Among many instances, see especially Sonnet 138 ("Therefore I lie with her and she with me, / And in our faults by lies we flattered be"), *Othello* ("oft my jealousy / Shapes faults that are not," 3.3.151-52), *Measure* ("some condemned for a fault alone," 2.1.40), and *The Winter's Tale* ("Th' offenses we have made you do, we'll answer, / If you first sinn'd with us, and that with us / You did continue fault," 1.2.83-85). Stephen Booth hears *false* in the *faults* of Sonnet 138 and cites an apparent faults/fall echo (*Othello*, 4.3.86-87); see his note on the complex issue of pronunciation (*Shakespeare's Sonnets* [New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1977], p. 481). Whether or not the "1" was audible in *faults*, the word could clearly serve as a nexus for the sense of sexual corruption.

Critics often portray Hamlet's world as infected by original sin (see, e.g., West, *The Court and the Castle*, p. 28; Levin, *The Question of Hamlet*, p. 58; Robert B. Bennett, "Hamlet and the Burden of Knowledge," *Shakespeare Studies* 15 [1982]: 77-97; Donald V. Stump, "Hamlet, Cain and Abel, and the Pattern of Divine Providence," *Renaissance Papers* 1985 [The Southern Renaissance Conference], pp. 29-30). Hankins associates original sin generally with the flesh of Hamlet's "good kissing carrion" ("Hamlet's 'God Kissing Carrion,'" pp. 515-16), Walter N. King specifically with Hamlet's own sullied flesh (*Hamlet's Search for Meaning* [Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1982], p. 44); but Hamlet's anatomy of original sin is more precise than they suggest. And it is also accepted orthodoxy: see Marina Warner (*Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and the Cult of the Virgin Mary* [New York: Random House, 1983], pp. 54, 57) for the Augustinian view that original sin was transmitted in the womb through the act of conception. Hence the logic that led eventually to the doctrine of Immaculate Conception for the Virgin (Warner, pp. 236-54) and also to her exemption from death (Warner, pp. 97-98; see also Julia Kristeva, "Stabat Mater," in *The Female Body in Western Culture*, ed. Susan Rubin Suleiman [Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1986], p. 102).

Without noting the pun on *fault* or the allusion to original sin, Erlich comes to a similar conclusion about this passage; see his use of it to explicate the "to be or not to be" soliloquy as a meditation on whether or not to be born (*Hamlet's Absent Father*, esp. pp. 182-85). Erlich understands the play's emphasis on birth primarily in relation to the oedipally castrating mother (e.g., p. 187); I am nonetheless indebted to his explication of the various forms of *bear* in the soliloquy and elsewhere (see esp. p. 183). The soliloquy similarly asks "how he or anyone lets himself be born as the one he is" in Stanley Cavell's meditation on Hamlet's refusal to accept his birth, which means his refusal "to take [his] existence upon [him]" ("Hamlet's Burden of Proof," *Disowning Knowledge in Six Plays of Shakespeare* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987], p. 187). In Cavell's complex account, acceptance of one's birth is acceptance of one's own separateness, hence acceptance of the sexually independent mother and the sexually dependent father shadowed in the fantasy of the primal scene; I locate the problematic of birth in more specifically preoedipal and gendered terms, as a register of fears of male contamination by the female at the point of origin of
subjectivity as well as in the primal scene.

29 The allusion to the fall in garden and serpent is commonly recognized (see, e.g., Arthur M. Eastman, "Hamlet in the Light of the Shakespearean Canon," in Perspectives on Hamlet, ed. William G. Holzberger and Peter B. Waldeck [Lewisburg, Pa.: Bucknell University Press, 1975], p. 53; Kirsch, "Hamlet's Grief," p. 25; and Stump, "Hamlet, Cain and Abel," p. 29); the anomalous position of Eve in this version of the fall is not.

30 Few critics share Flatter's conviction that Gertrude was literally complicit in Old Hamlet's murder (see note 6), but some note the sense of murderous culpability nonetheless associated with her; they attribute it to her (naturalistically conceived) failure to love her husband enough (Lora Heller and Abraham Heller, "Hamlet's Parents: The Dynamic Formulation of A Tragedy," American Imago 17 [1960]: 417-20), to the specifically male fantasies that equate female betrayal with death (Madelon [Sprengnether] Gohlke, "I wooed thee with my sword: Shakespeare's Tragic Paradigms," in Representing Shakespeare, p. 173; A. Andre Glaz, "Hamlet, Or the Tragedy of Shakespeare," American Imago 18 [1961]: 139) or to fantasies of the primal scene in which the mother damages the father (Erlich, Hamlet's Absent Father, pp. 62-63, 115; Cavell, Disowning Knowledge, pp. 183-85). Others note the more generalized nexus of sexuality and death without addressing the specific issue of Gertrude's culpability (e.g., Levin, The Question of Hamlet, pp. 59, 64; Moloney and Rockelein, "A New Interpretation of Hamlet" p. 94; Aldus, Mousetrap, pp. 108-13). In thinking of the story of fratricidal rivalry in effect as a cover for the more primary story of male subjection to the female, I am implicitly quarreling with the assumptions of Girard and others, for whom woman takes on meaning only insofar as she functions as a sign of differentiation between men; Girardian No-Difference seems to me at its most dangerous—at least to the Shakespearean (male) subject—when it threatens to obliterate the difference between male and female on which manhood is founded.

31 The shift of blame from male to female that is the subtext of Hamlet is modeled in little by the Player's speech on the death of Priam, where the strumpet Fortune stands in for Pyrrhus at the crucial moment of the murder (2.2.488-89); see Erlich, Hamlet's Absent Father, p. 118, and Chapter 3, p. 43, above.

32 See Kay Stockholder (Dream Works: Lovers and Families in Shakespeare's Plays [Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987], pp. 52-53) for a similar formulation. OED 1 (e) gives "sexual intercourse" as one of the meanings for mixture. Holland cites several psychoanalytic critics who see the poisoning "as a childishly confused account of the sexual act" (Psychoanalysis and Shakespeare, p. 194); see also Erlich (Hamlet's Absent Father, p. 93), and especially Cavell, who reads the dumb-show poisoning as Hamlet's dream-version of a primal scene fantasy (Disowning Knowledge, p. 185).

33 Skin eruptions of the sort the ghost describes were one of the symptoms of syphilis (see James Cleugh, Secret Enemy: The Story of a Disease [London: Thames and Hudson, 1954], pp. 46-50); Thersites wishes "tetter" on the "masculine whore" Patroclus (Troilus and Cressida, 5.1.16, 22). Both the ghost's "crust" and his odd "bark'd about" are anticipated in early descriptions of the disease: Francisco Lopez de Villalobos notes the "very ugly eruption of crusts upon the face and body," Josef Grunbeck the wrinkled black scabs, "harder than bark" (cited in English translation in Cleugh, pp. 48, 49). The description of the poison as a "leperous distilment" that courses through his body like "quicksilver" (1.5.64, 66) might also further the association of the poison with syphilis, since quicksilver was a routine treatment for syphilis (Cleugh, pp. 59, 61) and leprosy itself was associated with venereal disease (see Cleugh, pp. 53-55, and Charles Clayton Dennie, A History of Syphilis [Springfield, Ill.: Charles C. Thomas, 1962], pp. 13, 32; for Shakespearean uses of this association, see Timon's punning "Make the hoar leprosy ador'd" [Timon, 4.3.36] and Antony's wishing leprosy on "you ribbaudred nag of Egypt," Antony, 3.10.10).

34 See Erlich's similar speculations on this pun (Hamlet's Absent Father, pp. 62-63).
35 The descriptions of hell and of Gertrude's body coalesce in the burning characteristic of venereal disease; see Timon ("Be strong in whore, allure him, burn him up" [4.3.143]) and especially Thersites ("Lechery, lechery, still wars and lechery! . . . A burning devil take them!" [Troilus, 5.2.193-95]). For the female genitals as burning hell, see Booth, Shakespeare's Sonnets, pp. 499-500.

36 An incipient pun on matter and mater seems to run just below the surface of Hamlet, emerging only when Hamlet wittily asks his mother, "Now, mother, what's the matter?" (3.4.7) and perhaps in the "baser matter" of 1.5.104 (Fred Crews long ago electrified a Berkeley colloquium by speculating on this latter possibility after a talk by Avi Erlich). For extended commentary on the pun, see Erlich (Hamlet's Absent Father, p. 215) and Ferguson ("Hamlet: Letters and Spirits," p. 295); for the anatomical association of matter and mater, see Chapter 1, p. 6. Shakespeare toys with this association even in casual use: see, for example, Twelfth Night, where Sebastian's proclamation that he is a spirit indeed, "but . . . in that dimension grossly clad / Which from the womb I did participate" (5.1.229-30) anticipates Hamlet's genesis of gross flesh. Given this association, even the gravedigger's reference to a corpse as "your whoreson dead body" (5.1.166) may not be wholly casual.

37 Hamlet's famous pun to Ophelia—"Do you think I meant country matters?" (3.2.115)—clarifies the use of "country" here. Erlich first called my attention to this pun in the soliloquy (see Hamlet's Absent Father, p. 188; and see the same page, and Booth, Shakespeare's Sonnets, p. 526, for the possibility that the conscience that makes cowards of us all (3.1.83) similarly puns on the female genitals.

38 The pun associating the poison with marriage and sexual union has been noted at least since Bradley (Shakespearean Tragedy, p. 126); Faber sees in Hamlet's forcing Claudius to drink his "union" specifically the playing out of Hamlet's oral aggression ("Hamlet, Sarcasm and Psychoanalysis," p. 89).

39 See note 36 for the pun on mater/matter.

40 In this paragraph, as elsewhere, I am drawing on ideas expressed by D. W. Winnicott in a series of essays on the interface between inner and outer in earliest infantile development, especially on the ways in which a developing core of selfhood can meet with a reliable world in a transitional zone that makes creative interaction between inner and outer possible, and on the ways in which this zone can be destroyed (see especially "Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomena," Through Paediatrics to Psycho-Analysis [London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-analysis, 1975], pp. 229-42; "Ego Distortion in Terms of True and False Self," The Maturational Processes and the Facilitating Environment [London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-analysis, 1972], pp. 140-52; and "Communicating and Not Communicating Leading to a Study of Certain Opposites," The Maturational Processes, pp. 179-92; and see Chapter 8, notes 83, 84, and 90, for further discussion of Winnicott). See also Wheeler on Hamlet's "excruciating efforts to establish a self while hiding it from others" for a similarly Winnicottian account (Shakespeare's Development, p. 198). Many have noted the troubled relationship between inner and outer in Hamlet: for particularly interesting accounts, see, e.g, Marvin Spevack on Hamlet's "self-conceived inner realm" ("Hamlet and Imagery: The Mind's Eye," Die Neueren Sprachen n.s.25 [1966]: 203-12), David Pirie on Hamlet's retreat into soliloquy ("Hamlet without the Prince," Critical Quarterly 14 (1972): 293-314), and Holland on Hamlet's "tendency to turn inner life into outward" (Psychoanalysis and Shakespeare, p. 204); Brent Cohen notes the extent to which even the distinction between inner and outer is problematized as Hamlet's claims to interiority become merely another role ("What is it you would see? : Hamlet and the Conscience of the Theatre," ELH 40 [1977]: 240-42). The vexed relationship between inner and outer in Hamlet makes for some odd readings of the play, in which anything distantly resembling plot or character is dissolved. For extreme instances, see Glaz, for whom the whole play acts out a conversation between Gertrude and Hamlet confirming Hamlet's—or maybe Shakespeare's—"illegitimacy ("Hamlet, Or the Tragedy of Shakespeare," pp. 129-58), and Aldus, who sees in all the male characters a single mythic man encountering sex and death in a single woman (The Mousetrap, e.g., pp. 115, 146, and 159); for a less extreme instance, see Stockholder, for whom plays are
always the dreams of their protagonists, in this case the oedipally tinged dream of Hamlet's conflicted move toward maturity (Dream Works, pp. 12-16, 40-64). The entire collapse of what he dismisses as the literal perspective on the play is especially frustrating in Aldus's account, since it prevents his sometimes fascinating intuitions from becoming fully coherent.

41 See Erickson's account of Horatio's defensive function for Hamlet (Patriarchal Structures, pp. 66-80); in his account, the imperviousness of Horatio helps Hamlet to ward off the psychic demands of his overwhelming father (pp. 68-69) and allows Hamlet safely to replicate the affectionate bond he cannot have with his mother or Ophelia (pp. 74-78).

42 Critics who use the model of Freud's "Mourning and Melancholia" (see note 12, above) generally assume that the lost object is Hamlet's father; but Hamlet's discovery of the whore inside himself suggests that the lost, introjected, and then berated object is his mother (see, e.g., Paul A. Jorgensen, "Hamlet's Therapy," The Huntington Library Quarterly 27 [1964]: 254-55, and Stephen A. Reid, "Hamlet's Melancholia," American Imago 31 [1974]: 389-92). Psychoanalytic critics sometimes note Hamlet's difficulty in reconciling what they see as the masculine and feminine elements within him; see, for example, Murray M. Schwartz ("Shakespeare through Contemporary Psychoanalysis," in Representing Shakespeare, p. 27) and especially Winnicott, in his not wholly successful attempt to gender the development of the objective subject ("Creativity and its Origins," in Playing and Reality [London: Tavistock Publications, 1971], esp. pp. 79-84; see also Rose's critique of Winnicott, "Hamlet—the Mona Lisa of Literature," p. 45). Holland points toward the same difficulty in Shakespeare (Psychoanalysis and Shakespeare, p. 142). The fullest account of Hamlet's relation to his own "femaleness" is David Leverenz's "The Woman in Hamlet: An Interpersonal View" (in Representing Shakespeare, pp. 110-28). Despite its suggestive use of double-bind theory and its wonderful account of Ophelia as an empty repository for other people's voices, this essay seems to me to some extent vitiated by its attempt to locate the female as a positive source of value within Shakespeare's text; it is much more successful in demonstrating Hamlet's revulsion against the female than in suggesting Shakespeare's critique of his revulsion. In Macbeth and Coriolanus, Shakespeare will foreground the consequences of constructing masculinity as the not-female; here he seems to me largely to replicate Hamlet's sense of the female as the source of weakness and contamination. For the basis of this construction of the masculine self in the theories of object-relations psychoanalysis, see Chapter 1, p. 7; for Hamlet specifically, see Madelon Gohlke, "I wooed thee with my sword: Shakespeare's Tragic Paradigms," in Representing Shakespeare, pp. 172-73.

43 In an attempt to preserve Hamlet's nobility, several critics have attributed his behavior in 3.4 to his high-minded and altogether selfless reformist impulses toward his mother (see, for example, Bradley, Shakespearean Tragedy, p. 115; Joseph, Conscience and the King, pp. 95-97; Frye, The Renaissance "Hamlet", pp. 152, 162); but Knights notes that he "seems intent not so much on exposing lust as on indulging an uncontrollable spite against the flesh" ("Prince Hamlet," p. 151). I would add that he shows very few signs of interest in his mother as a real person who might be won to repentance; in my view, she remains almost entirely a fantasy-object for him in this scene.

44 As Charney notes, "Hamlet characteristically displaces the expected plot interest from the king . . . to his mother" in the middle of the play; the "crucial prayer scene occurs, as it were, in passing" ("The 'Now Could I Drink Hot Blood' Soliloquy," pp. 82-83).

45 Although Barber does not specifically discuss this moment in Hamlet, my sense of the importance of the sacred as a psychic category in Shakespeare is greatly indebted to him. His work—which I first saw in 1976—locates the tragic need to find the sacred in familial relationships in the context of the Protestant dismantling of the Holy Family, especially of the Holy Mother "whose worship could help meet the profound need for relationship to an ideal feminine figure, unsullied either by her own sexuality or by the sexual insecurities of men and unlimited in maternal solace and generosity" (Barber and Wheeler, The Whole Journey, p. 32; see also "On Christianity and the Family: Tragedy of the Sacred," in Twentieth Century
Interpretations of "King Lear", ed. Janet Adelman [Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1978], pp. 117-19, and "The Family in Shakespeare's Development: Tragedy and Sacredness," in Representing Shakespeare, pp. 188-202, for earlier formulations of these ideas. Although Barber and Wheeler's full discussion of Hamlet in The Whole Journey foregrounds the father-son relationship, they characterize relationship to the mother as the "anguished center of Hamlet's experience" in discussing the needs the Holy Mother is no longer available to fulfill (p. 31). Wheeler's earlier account of Hamlet in Shakespeare's Development and the Problem Comedies powerfully foregrounds this anguished center: in it, he draws on the work of Erik Erikson (especially pp. 82-83, 161) and Winnicott (especially pp. 195-99) to explicate Hamlet's "need to repurify and rediscover himself in the trustworthy, internalized maternal presence that Gertrude has contaminated" (p. 196); in his view, Hamlet can begin to imagine that blessed presence only after his matricidal impulse is "released and deflected onto Polonius" (p. 197).

46 See Meredith Skura's account of the ways in which Hamlet's world embodies (and hence justifies) what he feels (The Literary Use of the Psychoanalytic Process [New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1981], p. 47). Though she seems to me too quick to dismiss the locus of fantasy in the character of Hamlet—"Hamlet recreates the fantasy, not the fantasizer" (p. 48)—and though she stresses oedipal to the exclusion of preoedipal fantasy, her account of the presence and status of fantasy in Hamlet and in other literary works seems to me extraordinarily rich and compelling (see the whole of Chapter 3, "Literature as Fantasy," pp. 58-124; and see especially pp. 47-50, 97-98, for Hamlet).

47 See Eastman, Hamlet in the Light of the Shakespearean Canon," for a striking explication of Hamlet via its exfoliations in Othello and King Lear; this essay anticipates my own formulations at several points (see esp. pp. 55-56, on Lear's vagina/hell-mouth, and p. 65, on the "deep desire for spiritual rapprochement" in the blessing of parent and child).

Joanna Montgomery Byles (essay date 1994)


[In the following essay, Byles examines the psychological origins of revenge in Hamlet, arguing that for Hamlet, the demands of his ego and superego conflict, leaving him ashamed of his father's command to revenge as well as ashamed of his inability to fulfill his father's command.]

Hamlet tells us, he has 'that within which passes show' (I. ii. 85). We become intensely aware of Hamlet's inner life through his soliloquies, which externalize and dramatize his inner conflicts so powerfully. How to denote these inner tensions, and his all-pervasive feelings of powerlessness and rage, and to express them truly is Hamlet's problem throughout the play.

In this essay I should like to focus on some of the psychological origins of revenge in Hamlet. I acknowledge that what I have to say leaves out many other problems, but from the perspective of psychoanalysis we might pose the following questions: what is the psychological object of mimesis in revenge tragedies, particularly in Hamlet? Why are many of Hamlet's actions motivated by impulse rather than reason? What is being represented? What role do destructive and self-destructive impulses play in Hamlet's destiny? What part does the socialized and / or individual superego play in creating the revenge tragedy in Hamlet? Is tragic revenge different from tragi-comic revenge? Is there some basic dynamic pattern of psychic action that Shakespearean tragedy dramatizes as revenge? How can Freud and other theorists help us to understand this dynamic pattern?

The concept of the superego, both individual and cultural, is important to our understanding of the dynamics of aggressive destruction in Shakespeare's tragedies involving revenge. The Freudian superego is usually thought of as heir to the Oedipus complex, the internalization of parental values and the source of punitive,
approving and idealizing attitudes towards the self. In drama, the tragic hero's superego is, of course, separate from the cultural superego. Superego aggression may be directed against the self or the external world; the operative feeling in this unconscious aggression is externalized and dramatized as revengeful hatred. Revenge is an important means of dramatizing this dynamic and its cultural significance within family relationships in the drama.

On one level, *Hamlet* is a play about conflict between the generations; within the play, parents and children are often enemies. All the younger generation are manipulated by the older generation for selfish ends. Clearly, *Hamlet* invites reflection on the proper relation between generations and the significance of inter-generational conflict. After the death of his father, Hamlet cannot leave his family until he is forced into exile; he cannot separate from them, not just geographically but emotionally. Laertes is the only one to escape from Elsinore of his own free will. Ophelia is in much the same position as Hamlet until she takes her own life. Hamlet thinks constantly of suicide or murderous revenge; at times, he is totally absorbed by these deathly desires. Further, in this play two sons are slain, a daughter commits suicide, a mother and two fathers are murdered, and one, old Norway, is killed. The Pyrrhus speech with its arrested sword of vengeance first 'Repugnant to command' (II. ii. 467) and then 'Aroused' (II. ii. 484) falling on old Priam, whose sons had ambushed and murdered Pyrrhus' father, Achilles, extends this appalling pattern, metaphorically, to a fourth murdered father. The allusion looks back to the long ritual of revenge in literature. And, of course, it foreshadows Hamlet's own actions. Hamlet has already recalled the dire effect of this ancient revenge story on families in his earlier prompting of the chief Player: Pyrrhus is described as

*horridly trick 'd
With blood of fathers, mothers, daughters, sons

(II. ii. 453-4)*

In *Hamlet*, Shakespeare subverts the essential logic of the revenge form by representing revenge as an inward tragic event, reinforced by destructive family relationships whose psychic energies violate and destroy the protagonist's psychic wholeness, fragmenting and ultimately dissolving the personality. In Hamlet himself, hate and destructiveness are consuming passions; the deep movement of superego aggression that motivates revenge carries him towards death.

I necessarily assume that tragic action directly links the protagonist's suffering and death to the vengeful destructiveness of his superego and that of the community he exists in, especially his family. Tragic revenge dramatizes qualitative differences between various forms of superego aggressiveness. Ultimately, it is the tragic revenge hero's fate to satisfy the conflicting demands of the socialized and his own superego; when these demands coalesce, we have a definitive tragic image: the destruction and self-sacrifice of the tragic hero.

In *Hamlet*, Osric is the agent of this coalescence. The wager represents the poisonous revenge of both Laertes and Claudius; it is Hamlet's death warrant, but Hamlet has surrendered himself to its treachery and, more importantly, to his own death. The devoted Horatio guesses Hamlet's terrifying and deep resignation:

> If your mind dislike anything, obey it. I will forestall their repair hither and say you are not fit.

(V. ii. 213-14)

But Hamlet is ready to 'Let be' (V. ii. 220). At the end of the tragedy, there is a deathly co-operation between the protagonist and his environment in which destructive aggression is resolved and guilt atoned.
The theatre supplies the external frame onto which the internal struggle of the ego and superego is most commonly projected. The tragic hero involved in revenge acts out the inner conflict of the ego's struggle against the cruel demands of both his own and the socialized superego. The play represents the author's working out of this unconscious conflict which is transformed, with all its identifications into the play. The question of the socialized superego, or the communal or cultural superego, allows us to shift from the inner dynamics of the hero to those who surround him, the external figures in the social world of the play, who not only influence his inner life, but his entire tragic history, especially his family history. For example, at the beginning of the play Hamlet is mourning his lost father, and, in another sense his lost mother; what he needs to do is to refashion his emotional attachments to them. However, the circumstances of the play, the 'rottenness' in the State of Denmark and the crucial command to revenge, prevent Hamlet from identifying himself as the new heir; the demand to revenge intensifies his introjection of his father whose ideal he cannot live up to, and whose demands he cannot carry out. Instead of feeling the support and love of his father, he feels the fear, separation and anxiety of frustration and hostility. Added to all this is the general menacing atmosphere of the court, covered, of course, by a courtly show of good manners, in which nearly everyone seems to spy on him; the play is full of licit and illicit listening, secrecy and anxiety. The command to murderous revenge denies Hamlet the possibility of developing the healing processes of mourning whereby the lost loved one is internalized. Moreover, Hamlet's dead father's revelations cause Hamlet cruelly to reject Ophelia, who might have saved him from himself, and would, in fact, have prevented the separation of Eros and aggression in Hamlet's psychodynamic story.

Ophelia, too, is a victim of parental authority. She allows her father to deny what for her is her most crucial reality: her love for Hamlet and its history. Although she is in love with Hamlet and has encouraged his intimacies, Ophelia allows her father to deny this emotional reality:

OPHELIA: My lord, he hath importun'd me with love
In honourable fashion.
POLONIUS: Ay, fashion you may call it. Go to, go to.
OPHELIA: And hath given countenance to his speech, my lord,
With almost all the holy vows of heaven.
POLONIUS: Ay, springes to catch woodcocks. I do know,
When the blood burns, how prodigal the soul
Lends the tongue vows.

. . . . .

This is for all.
I would not, in plain terms, from this time forth
Have you so slander any moment leisure
As to give words or talk with the Lord Hamlet.
Look to't, I charge you. Come your ways.
OPHELIA: I shall obey, my lord.

(I. iii. 110-36)

Polonius is clearly not at all interested in what Ophelia feels or how she perceives her relationship with Hamlet. Moreover, he forces her to be untrue to herself: to deny her love for Hamlet. He forces her into an invidious position and uses her to entrap Hamlet, so that he can prove himself right about Hamlet's 'madness', which then allows Claudius to take advantage of Hamlet's 'madness'. But it is the poor, motherless Ophelia, who actually goes mad. All the fathers in the play, including the Ghost, without the slightest compunction gratify their own needs by manipulating their children.
Why, many critics have asked, does Hamlet accept the role of revenger? Ethically and morally, it may be considered right or wrong; but, from a psychoanalytic perspective, it is the only thing he can do, mobilized as he is by the traumatic effects of his family predicament. He must identify with his dead father's outrage, and rescue his mother from her incestuous marriage, if he is to recover an integrated self and the integrity he needs to become his father's rightful heir:

(Recall thee?
Ay, thou poor ghost, whiles memory holds a seat
In this distracted globe. Remember thee?
Yea, from the table of my memory
I'll wipe away all trivial fond records,
All saws of books, all forms, all pressures past
That youth and observation copied there,
And thy commandment all alone shall live
Within the book and volume of my brain
Unmix'd with baser matter.

(I. v. 95-104)

But all this unconsciously involves the murderous and self-murderous superego, dramatized as delay. The inward traumatic pressures of the past cannot so easily be wiped out.

In one sense, we might consider the characters in Hamlet as agents of the Ghost's hate. Or the Ghost may be a dramatic means of externalizing Hamlet's desire to kill Claudius, since the command to kill Claudius seems to come from outside himself. Daniel E. Schneider writes that a play is like a dream turned inside out—and an interpretation at the same time, the success and coherence depending upon the talents of the dramatist to organize and interpret fantasies so that they resonate with the fantasies of the audience. The dream's conflicting pain / pleasure principle made paramount and explicit is the emotional force of the drama; and the interpretation subsidiary and implicit is in its action, in plot, the exposition and motivating force of the drama's story, the dynamic of the author's conflict as it is externalized and interpreted into the fully realized social world of the drama. I find this idea interesting and useful because it unites three essentials: the dramatist's psychic conflicts, the drama itself in all its identifications and the psyche or psyches of the audience. It takes account of the complexity of the tragedy as a work of art and the variety of reactions it stimulates in its audience, from the release of passion under the protection of aesthetic illusion, to the highly complex process of recreation under the dramatist's guidance, of a series of processes of psychic discharge that take place in the audience, including pity and fear. The audience must be drawn into the drama and its resistances overcome; Shakespeare forces the audience to identify and act out in their minds his interpretation of inner conflict and disturbing fantasies that provide the unconscious dynamic as the action moves through conflict, crisis, climax and resolution. In Shakespeare's tragedies involving revenge, the action is nearly always fatal, and we, too, must experience this pressure, recognizing with terror the cruel power of superego aggression, of the dynamic that powers hateful revenge, in ourselves as well as in our representatives on stage, in life as well as in the drama. One reason why revenge tragedies were popular in Shakespeare's culture and are still popular in our own, is that revenge is profoundly disturbing; for an audience the projection of revenge is extremely therapeutic.

A definitive image of tragi-comedy is of forgiveness, reconciliation and regeneration. The endings of tragic revenges are quite otherwise, and perhaps relate to an earlier or more primitive form of psychic conflict (such as scapegoating) than to the life-asserting endings of many tragi-comedies, the underlying dynamic of which is shame, not guilt. Guilt, and the hateful destructiveness and rage which accompany it, are at the centre of Hamlet's experience. The superego is a highly important factor in illustrating the fate of the protagonist in revenge tragedy; he is one for whom the conscious and / or unconscious sense of guilt, with the corresponding
need for punishment, satisfied through suffering and eventually through an honourable death, plays a decisive part in his will and willingness to die. In revenge tragedy, as opposed to tragi-comedy involving revenge, the protagonist's superego is a cruelly persecuting agency which his ego has good reason to dread, and much of the tragic hero's motivation, once he has renounced Eros (defusion), derives from the struggle either to avoid or to submit to its claims. When the hostile elements in the external world of the play are directed against Hamlet, he not only internalizes them, but they combine with his own self-destructive tendencies to produce a deep need for inner punishment: death. But this is the final dynamic of Hamlet's psychic journey; the dramatic action covers much ground before that ultimate act.

Tragic Alternatives: Eros and Superego Aggression

To some extent, it is the denial of Eros and the destructiveness of family attachments which largely contribute to the fate of Hamlet, Othello, Macbeth and King Lear. All these tragic figures make the initial mistake of rejecting a crucial and sustaining love relationship. These tragic heroes fail in love, are usually unsuccessful in their ambition, which often includes a powerful and fatal desire for revenge, and suffer from a highly developed superego, whose effect is to produce a pronounced sense of guilt. As I have already suggested, when this inner dynamic of guilt combines with the hostile tendencies of the cultural superego within the social world of the drama, we have a definitive generic marker of tragedy: the self-sacrifice of the tragic figure.

There are two Freudian concepts which might help us to understand these psychodynamics of tragic action and how Shakespeare dramatizes them in the revenge motif of Hamlet in particular:

1. Defusion of the dual instincts of Eros and Death, and
2. Superego aggression, which is one aspect of the death instinct.

Freud employs the idea of Eros, from Plato's Symposium, in his final instinct theory (1930), to connote the whole of the life instincts, as opposed to the death instinct. According to Freud, the dual instincts are usually mingled with one another or fused. 'Normally,' Freud says, 'the two kinds of instincts seldom appear in isolation from each other, but are alloyed with each other in varying and different proportions, and so become unrecognizable to our judgment.' It is important to understand that Eros neutralizes aggression, and that the ego must find objects for Eros and aggression. Usually, aggression is modified in its impact

1. by displacement to other object;
2. by restriction of its aim;
3. by the sublimation of the aggressive energy; and
4. through the influence of fusion.

Ultimately, none of these modifications applies to Hamlet.

The tragic process (which includes the total environment of the play, with all its hostilities and hatreds, its failures in loving, and its tremendous emphasis on guilt and the corresponding need for punishment and suffering), instead of strengthening the ego in its task of regulating Eros and aggression so that they do not clash with reality and defuse (separate), is one in which the ego is destroyed by the undermining of its total organization. Fusion represents an integrated ego, one which is functioning well, and, with the aid of Eros, able to modify aggression in the four normal ways just mentioned. The failure of Eros results in complete defusion (separation) of the dual instincts and the dominance of the aggressive death instinct, whose agency is the harsh, self-abusive superego. It is then the task of the ego to defend itself by keeping the aggression directed outward in the interests of self-preservation. According to Freud, 'It would seem that aggression when it is impeded entails serious injury, and that we have to destroy other things and other people in order not to destroy ourselves, in order to protect ourselves from the tendency to self-destruction.' As long as the
protagonist can displace his inner aggression onto others, usually through hating and revenging, he survives. After separation of the dual instincts (defusion), the erotic component no longer has the power to bind the whole of the destructiveness that was combined with it, and this releases much of the cruelty and violence that is so characteristic of superego aggression and of Shakespeare's tragedies involving revenge, as we see in *Hamlet*.

**Sources, Formation and Function of Superego**

The superego is the psychic agency that produces the sense of the ideal, of the way things ought to be, not the way they are, and so it is not always oriented towards reality. Freud thought the source of the superego was the internalization of the castrating Oedipal father. He also thought the superego was one aspect of the death instinct (thanatos) in its aggressive need for punishment. Freud theorized that the cruel superego was also the revengeful aggressor that produces not only the need to idealize, but also the need for aggressive self-abuse when the ideal fails: for suicide or murder. Although the formation of the superego is grounded in hostile Oedipal wishes and in the renunciation of loving, it is subsequently refined, according to Freud, by the contributions of social and cultural requirements (education, religion, morality).

In her chapter on superego formation, Edith Jacobson states that the core of the superego is 'the law against patricide and matricide and the incest taboo'; she then goes on to say that superego fear continues and replaces castration fear, but that some people may 'unconsciously equate the superego with the threatening paternal—or their own—phallus'. She also points out that 'there is a tremendous step between the simple moral logic of castration fear, fear of punishment and hope of reward, to the abstract moral level of a superego which has expanded from the taboo of incest and murder to a set of impersonal, ethical principles and regulations for human behaviour.' Melanie Klein traces the beginning of the superego back to early (infant) oral fantasies of self-destruction, which is a direct manifestation of the death instinct. In his reinterpretation of the death instinct, Jean Laplanche sees the death drive 'not as an element in conflict but as conflict itself substantialized, an internal principle of strife and disunion.' In his chapter on the death instinct, Paul Ricoeur sees the superego as an essential instinct problem for the philosophy of art.

The death instinct is a useful concept in many ways: it represents a decomposition of the ego under attack by the superego; it tends to weaken object relations, and it tends to narcissistic withdrawal. In other words, the person in whom the aggressive tendencies of the death instinct are dominant over the life instincts has a weakened ego, and in an effort to regain the strength of self-esteem and self-confidence, he / she tries narcissistically to withdraw from persons and conflicts altogether. This is particularly true if the person's love relations have failed. If one thinks of Eros as a life-preserving force (the ego needs Eros to carry out its intricate life-preserving functions), and if one thinks of the idealistic superego as the self-aggressor, promoting life-denying tendencies, then the beloved may become a means whereby the ego is defeated. More often than not, Shakespeare dramatizes sexuality as a destructive force, and this is especially true of *Hamlet*.

One striking collusion between the dynamics of character and the universe of Shakespearean tragedy is that the protagonist chooses the wrong lover, or his perception of the loved one is disastrously flawed, or his family relationships are intimately destructive. The ability to relate to the other/s is an immense difficulty, if not to say impossibility for Hamlet. This may be because, as Richard P. Wheeler and others have suggested, men are less able to merge their identity with the other/s, than women are (i.e., men have more definite boundaries to the self than women), or because tragedy dramatizes the inability to steer a relationship through loving betrayal to survival. D. W. Winnicott describes these phases in psychoanalytic object-relations terms as using, destroying and surviving. Winnicott's idea applies more to tragicomedy than to tragedy. A definitive image of tragi-comedy is forgiveness, reconciliation and regeneration; that of tragedy is self-sacrifice and death.
Perhaps narcissism is relevant here. The aim of the narcissist is to be loved, and the narcissistic lover is usually dangerously dependent on his beloved. One who loves in this way has 'expropriated' part of his narcissism, which can only be replaced by his being loved. There is a constant need to replenish the amount of self-love the narcissistic lover gives the other. If, instead of being loved, the narcissistic person is betrayed, it is as if he had betrayed himself; he feels a painful lowering of self-esteem and is full of self-pity. He does not, however, hate himself as the idealist does in similar circumstances. On the contrary, betrayal usually leads to a compensatory increase in narcissism; instead of being fixated on the loved one, the narcissist regresses to a previous point in his life when he loved only himself. In other words, a narcissistic lover who is betrayed is often sustained by his narcissism, whereas an idealistic lover feels utterly worthless and hates himself sometimes to the point of suicide. The idealist lover is driven by superego demands either to murder his beloved and/or himself.

It is only fair to say that there has been enormous resistance to Freud's idea of a death instinct since he first formulated it. Perhaps this resistance has something to do with our unwillingness to accept the violence of self-destructive and revengeful tendencies within ourselves. It seems it is easier to bear punishment inflicted from the outside than to face internal self-destructive tendencies. Possibly the origin of the superego also represents a similar attempt at externalization. Ehrenzweig suggests that instead of being rent by internal tensions, it is as if the ego projects its self-destructive aggression onto a split-off part, the superego, and prefers to submit to its attacks which now come to it from outside. Superego aggression also projects itself into the outside world and onto the figures of punishing parents, punitive laws, repressive political regimes, conquest and invasions.

The superego's function is to induce guilt and to repress; openness (not closure) requires a weakening of the superego power of repression. Yet a lifting of repression, or recognition of repressed material, may produce extreme anxiety, even panic. For example, on one level of interpretation, the Ghost represents the unrepressed hostility Hamlet feels for his father. The hostility Hamlet feels for his father is externalized as revengeful hatred not only for Claudius, his 'uncle-father', but also for Gertrude, his 'aunt-mother', and for Ophelia. These internal processes are externalized and dramatized in the soliloquies, where the thought is frequently revengeful, sadistic and self-destructive. Hamlet's soliloquies are also expressions of superego conflict: to die or to live; to honour or to revenge; duty to oneself or to one's father. On one level, Hamlet is ashamed of his father's command to revenge, and, at the same time, ashamed of his inability to fulfil the command.

Eleanor Prosser suggests the Ghost is an idea Hamlet has long been waiting for. It is possible that the Ghost is not only a projection of Hamlet's hostile feelings towards his father, but also serves as a projection of his murderous feelings about his mother's husband:

O villain, villain, smiling damned villain!

.....

So, uncle, there you are.

(I. v. 106-10)

If the command to murder Claudius is another instance of repressed wishes surfacing into conscious intention, then it is obviously less threatening that the revengeful need seems to come from outside, from the superego demands of authority, of the outraged father, husband and king. The Oedipal theory clearly works here. Hamlet has been thinking, on some pre-conscious level, about his uncle-father; and that is why at first he thrills to the command to revenge and murder: prophetic soul! My uncle! (I. v. 41).
By creating the Ghost, Shakespeare creates a father-son-mother confrontation at the heart of the play. The play dramatizes a crisis in Hamlet's identification with his idealized, murdered, heroic father, who returns from the dead to demand Hamlet revenge his death, and in so doing, rescue his mother from her second, and incestuous marriage. At first Hamlet responds with alacrity to his ghostly father's demands; then with paralyzing reluctance: 'sed spite, / That ever I was born to set it right' (I. v. 196-7). Everything hinges on Hamlet's struggle to identify with his father's superego demands that he revenge; that is, after all, justice within the revenge genre, and it coincides with one aspect of the cultural superego—it is the right thing to do—but Shakespeare sets up the problem of revenge in such a disruptive way that the action on moral, ethical and psychic levels is blocked. The conflict of revenge engages the action on many levels, delaying revenge through ambiguities in psychological motivation, language and action.

The creation of the Ghost is itself a piece of theatrical aggression for it stops Hamlet's initial fierce self-restraint; allows him to express his deeply conflicting feelings about Claudius, and his desire to kill him. The Ghost's revelation of murder, incest and adultery—'Ay, that incestuous, that adulterate beast' (I. v. 42)—is a validation of Hamlet's suspicions and justification of his loathing of Claudius the man, with 'traitorous gifts' (I. v. 43), seduced his mother, that 'seeming-virtuous queen' (I. v. 46). 'Seeming', as we learn earlier from Hamlet, can cover all kinds of deception and crime. The revelation is also conclusive and irreversible affirmation of his intense feelings about his mother: 'O'most pernicious woman!' (I. v. 105). The Ghost and Hamlet share the same obsession: Gertrude. Together they comprise an ancient and often cursed triangle. The acting of The Mousetrap, as arranged by Hamlet, is, in fact, a fantasized murder in which Hamlet avenges by doubling as 'one Lucianus, nephew to the King' (III. ii. 239). As actor-manager, Hamlet externalizes or projects his inner conflict about revenge onto the directing and acting of the entire scene of his father's murder, which, by pure chance (or dramatic device!) parallels The Murder of Gonzago:

I'll have these players
Play something like the murder of my father
Before mine uncle

(II. ii. 590-2)

The play reaches its climax with Hamlet ferociously urging Lucianus on: 'Come, the croaking raven doth bellow for revenge' (III. ii. 247-8). As director, actor, chorus and audience, Hamlet is ecstatic at the end of this performance, because it is as if he had avenged his father. The successful displacement of inner aggression affords Hamlet immense relief. Moreover, he has made public the entire story, from known beginning to wished-for conclusion.

The Ghost is the means of dramatizing Hamlet's deep-seated inner fears and anxiety, his hatred of Claudius and his unconscious desire to kill the man who has 'whor'd' (V. ii. 64) his mother, murdered his father and has

Popp'd in between th'election and my hopes.

(V. ii. 65)

The Ghost's foul imaginings about Gertrude's lustful sexuality anticipate Hamlet's own image of incestuous sheets (I. ii. 157). There is very little evidence in Gertrude's dialogue that she is as lustful as her first husband and Hamlet would have us suppose. Just as Iago voices Othello's disturbing, destructive, jealous fantasies, so the Ghost does Hamlet's. It may be objected that the Ghost tells Hamlet to leave his mother 'to heaven' (I. v. 86). In the closet scene, he pleads with Hamlet to step between her and her fighting soul (III. iv. 113). But it is too late. And Hamlet's father knows it. He has timed his intervention perfectly; for, in his passionate and deeply conflicted interview with his mother, Hamlet has already used enough verbal daggers to cleave her heart in twain (III. iv. 158). It is needless to labour the Oedipal basis of the closet scene. It is a famous
piece of psychoanalytic criticism frequently incorporated into contemporary productions. It is clear that Hamlet is torn between love and loathing for his mother, and that the destructive impulses of his own superego are displaced temporarily in trying to be her conscience. This affords him some relief from the intense anxiety and painful tension of inner aggressiveness, just as his cruel treatment of Ophelia did, and for similar reasons. But what chance does Hamlet have of keeping the crucial love of Ophelia, which might have sustained him? None. Hamlet is irrevocably trapped in a parental relationship involving murder, adultery and incest. What chance is there of detaching himself from this overwhelming guilt? None. He has been made responsible for wiping it out; moreover, he has promised to do so. And Hamlet is a responsible person; his superego sees to that, even if he curses his masculinity in being 'born to set it right' (I. v. 197). Yet Hamlet cannot become his father's avenger because that would involve him and his mother still further in family guilt. His repudiation of her makes clear the powerful family knot of emotional attachments that ruin their relationship:

You are the Queen, your husband's brother's wife,  
And, would it were not so, you are my mother.

(III. iv. 14-16)

The superego, then, is a revengeful force which seeks to punish. Hamlet tries to become his father's superego, but because he cannot act on it, his own superego takes revenge on him—torments him, kills him eventually. He cannot consciously question the morality of avenging his father's murder, because that would be to challenge his father; moreover, part of him is torn by the moral discrepancy involved in committing murder as a solution to the problem of murder. In a conscious effort to gain control over the destructiveness of the superego, the tragic hero tries to project his sense of guilt, through his ambition or revenge, onto others. Hamlet channels his vengeful aggression in a variety of ways: through his constant cruelty to others, his verbal hostility and his 'antic disposition' (I. v. 180).

Barber and Wheeler write of Hamlet's need to use his hostility to 'protect his integrity against acquiescence in the corrupt world, on the one side, or acquiescence in self-loathing, on the other'. These critics also see Hamlet's 'need for revenge as the core of a need for expression and vindication'. Certainly Hamlet's aggression finds frequent relief in his violent expressiveness, especially when he turns love into hateful violence in the nunnery and closet scenes. The command to revenge is itself a directive to transform love into violent and vengeful hatred. It is a superego command from the idealized father to his son to hate and destroy the bestial father-figure of Claudius, that heap of 'garbage' (I. v. 57), that 'nasty sty' (III. iv. 94). Initially, the command to revenge displaces some of Hamlet's superego aggression outward in his attempts to 'catch the conscience of the King' (II. ii. 601) and to be his mother's conscience, but the failure to achieve revenge, to murder Claudius, and so be at one with his father, fills him with deep dismay and self-contempt, as his soliloquies reveal. Furthermore, his attempts to act out his inner conflicts, his desire to rescue his mother and kill Claudius, have resulted in the regrettable, accidental killing of Polonius and the devastating suicide of Ophelia. Moreover, his mother still shares his uncle's bed, continues to sleep between those 'incestuous sheets' (I. ii. 157). He suffers acute mental agony for these blunders.

No wonder Hamlet seems resigned to his own death upon his return from England; all his displacements have failed; the immense energy attached to his sense of guilt turns inward, there is nowhere else for it to go. Hamlet becomes a victim of his own desire for punishment—his need to end his life. He takes revenge upon himself; he accepts the wager from the absurd Osric: 'Tis a chuff, but, as I say, spacious in the possession of dirt' (V. ii. 88). This is the same anguished, grief-stricken Hamlet who, standing in Ophelia's open grave, has willed 'Millions of acres to be thrown on him so that he may be buried quick with her' (V. i. 276). His ego yields to his superego and takes on the suffering the self-abusive superego produces. In these circumstances, the ego collapses under the weight of so much revengeful self-hatred; the pain and anxiety produced by the murderous superego become unendurable. Hamlet submits his person to a duel arranged by one he knows to
be his mortal enemy.

Freud's view of instinctual fusion between erotic and aggressive instincts suggests an admixture of erotic quantities even in destructive processes, and this may explain any masochism there might be in the tragic hero's self-sacrifice, as well as the sadism in superego aggression. In Shakespearean tragic drama, the protagonist's sense of guilt (superego aggression) and need for punishment are so pronounced that the ego is not strong enough to be independent of the superego, or to control it. In normal living, this unconscious aggressive energy is displaced or sublimated. In this kind of tragedy, the ego seems unable to defend itself from the severity of the revengeful demands of the superego by such normal activities as repression, denial or rationalization. The function of the plot is to make sure the protagonist's displacements eventually fail. The ultimate aim of the tragic hero is to act out the compulsive nature of his guilt, both the guilt he feels for his own personal wrong-doing, and the generalized guilt which the social demands represented by the drama have required him to internalize. He is compelled to submit to the deathly demands of his own superego and those of the community.

In dying, Hamlet's psyche is cleansed of the burden of failed love, familial outrage and grief. As I suggested at the beginning of this essay, in Hamlet, Shakespeare represents revenge as an inward tragic event which is externalized, dramatized, and then reinforced by destructive family relationships whose psychic energies violate and eventually destroy the psychic wholeness of the tragic person. The conflict between ego and superego constitutes the dynamic action of Hamlet on many levels, creating revenge and its delay through acute inner anxieties and mental anguish, as well as ambiguities in action, language and thought. But, in the end, although the superego wins, because Hamlet must die, it is with Hamlet's / Shakespeare's total acceptance, as long as revenge is revealed for what it is: a dynamically hostile, hateful, destructive force, and, in Hamlet, an unbeatable enemy, as well as an Oedipal foe.

Through his conscious articulation and dramatization of the unconscious dynamics which drive stories of poisonous revenge, Shakespeare invites our reflection, invites us to hold the mirror up to our own deepest conflicts and desires. The resolution of Hamlet leaves us not only moved, but challenged and enlightened. Hamlet's fatal story is a lesson we must not ignore, but keep in our hearts, too:

If thou didst ever hold me in thy heart,
Absent thee from felicity awhile,
To tell my story.

(V. ii. 351-4)

The mimetic power of violent revenge in Hamlet depends on the reality of those psychic conflicts Shakespeare dramatizes as revenge.

Notes


3 Montgomery Byles,'A Basic Pattern of Psychological Conflict in Shakespearean Tragic Drama', University of Hartford Studies in Literature, 11 (1979), 58-71.


10 Freud,'The Ego and the Id'in *Complete Works*, XIX, 41-2; see also'Civilization and its Discontents'in *Complete Works*, XXI, 119.


12 Freud, *Complete Works*, XXI, 64-149.


"Since first we were dissevered": Trust and Autonomy in Shakespearean Tragedy and Romance in Schwartz and Kahn, eds, Representing Shakespeare, pp. 150-69.


Janet Adelman concentrates on the maternal point of the triangle between Hamlet, his father and his mother: 'As in a dream, the plot-conjunction of father's funeral and mother's remarriage expresses this return: it tells us that the idealized father's absence releases the threat of maternal sexuality, in effect subjecting the son to her annihilating power ( Suffocating Mothers: Fantasies of Maternal Origin in Shakespeare's Plays: 'Hamlet' to 'The Tempest' [New York and London: Routledge, 1992], p. 18).


Hamlet (Vol. 44): Gender Issues

Peter Erickson (essay date 1985)


[In the following excerpt, Erickson studies the importance of male bonds in Hamlet, maintaining that because both Gertrude and Ophelia fail to meet Hamlet's needs to be nurtured Hamlet transfers these emotions to Horatio.]

The tensions in the relationship between father and son in the Henriad are pushed in Hamlet to the point of full-fledged, paralyzing crisis. The patriarchal imperative equates love with obedience; love not being granted unconditionally, the son proves his loyalty by performing his duty as the father sees it. In Hamlet's case, this test takes the most drastic form imaginable:

GHOST. If thou didst ever thy dear father love—
HAM. O God! GHOST.
Revenge his foul and most unnatural murther.

(1.5.23-25)

Hamlet's reaction to the ghost's demand is to transform his mind into a tabula rasa fit to record the father's total claim on the son: "And thy commandement all alone shall live / Within the book and volume of my brain, / Unmix'd with baser matter" (102-4). At first sight the ghost appears to be a perfect solution to Hamlet's alienation because its intervention restores a direct link to the patriarchal heritage on which Hamlet might base a heroic identity. But the ghost is ultimately part of Hamlet's problem. While the ghost bolsters Hamlet's identity by confirming the validity of his "prophetic soul" (40), it simultaneously takes away identity by usurping Hamlet's self. One reason for Hamlet's later defensiveness toward Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, who so consistently demonstrate their inability to "play upon" Hamlet, is his prior experience with a ghost who has rendered him "easier to be play'd on than a pipe" (3.2.370) and who has even perhaps "plucked out the heart of my mystery" (365-66).

The ghost's takeover of Hamlet's identity denies options. The distinction between "To be, or not to be" (3.1.55) is hard to maintain when the self-fashioning the ghost requires entails self-cancellation—the loss of independence. Hamlet must respond to his father's love, but at the same time he must be acutely sensitive to the coercive, all-encompassing nature of the self his father has fashioned for him. Hence a conflict emerges in Hamlet between obedience and resistance to the ghost's demands. Under the pressure of the ghost's "Remember me" (1.5.91) Hamlet makes an overwhelming commitment to obedience. Yet in the outburst that ends the scene—"O cursed spite / That ever I was born to set it right" (188-89)—Hamlet sounds the note of regret that includes a potential for resistance. It is in connection with this inner conflict that Horatio's value to Hamlet can be understood.

When Hamlet abruptly reaches out to Horatio, he is establishing a point of contact outside the distressed father-son relationship. He alleviate his isolation by choosing a man who is "not a pipe for Fortune's finger / To sound what stop she please" (3.2.70-71), that is, a man who offers the security of a constancy that contrasts with Hamlet's own experience of being played upon by the ghost. Hamlet immediately presses the alliance with Horatio into the service of the ghost, sharing his triumph when Horatio and Hamlet remain on stage after Claudius's hasty exit from the play within a play: "O good Horatio, I'll take the ghost's word for a thousand pound. Didst perceive?" (286-87). Nevertheless, Hamlet's friendship with Horatio is not entirely contained within the framework of Hamlet's allegiance to his father. As the friendship is developed, it becomes a relationship unto itself, separate from Hamlet's overriding concern with the ghost.

Horatio serves as a refuge for Hamlet not only because he provides momentary relief from anguish but also because he occasions a sense of trust through which Hamlet might recover a portion of the identity negated by his submission to the ghost. One reading of Hamlet flatly pronounces Hamlet's failure to maintain any independence. In this view, Hamlet finally capitulates to the ghost's demands. It is true that Hamlet does not achieve complete "success" in separating himself from his father: his use of the signet (5.2.49) indicates a continuing identification with his father's purposes. But it is also true that while Hamlet does in the end carry out the ghost's "dread command" (3.4.108) by murdering Claudius, his identity does not thereby reduce simply to the embodiment of his father's dictates. The conflict between the role his father imposes on him and the separate self toward which he gropes does not collapse in favor of the former. Hamlet is ultimately true to himself in the sense that he holds on to his dilemma. The conflict itself enables him tragically to establish an individual identity, a process that helps to account for his serenity at the end. Hamlet's struggle redeems the deeper resonance in Polonius's precept "to thine own self be true" (1.3.78), one of the saws Hamlet tried to "wipe away" (1.5.99) under the impact of the ghost's revelation. In making the "truth" of Hamlet's "self dramatically convincing, Horatio is essential.
Horatio's prominence toward the end of the play coincides with the cessation of Hamlet's soliloquies. Hamlet's last soliloquy occurs in act 4, scene 4; Horatio is at Hamlet's side throughout act 5. By addressing his final statements to Horatio, Hamlet is freed from his verbal isolation, especially from his earlier self-torturing relation to language as one who "Must like a whore unpack my heart with words" (2.2.585). Having in Horatio a personal audience he can count on to receive his words and ultimately to carry on his linguistic future after his own "silence" (5.2.358) allows Hamlet to feel that language is no longer automatically inadequate to "that within" (1.2.85). The Hamlet-Horatio relationship provides one of the main lines of development from act 4, scene 6, where Hamlet reestablishes contact with Horatio by letter, through to the final scene, when Hamlet asks his faithful comrade "To tell my story" (5.2.349). The letter serves as a point of transition between Hamlet's soliloquies and the direct contact with Horatio that begins in the graveyard. In closing the letter by presenting himself as "He that thou knowest thine" (4.6.30), Hamlet reiterates his earlier "election" (3.2.64) of Horatio and sets the tone for the intimate address that his devotion will make possible in the final act.

Despite Hamlet's absolute dedication to the ghost's final order to "remember me" (1.5.91), the ghost does not have the last word. Horatio's presence acts as an alternative that allows Hamlet to expand his attention beyond a narrow focus on the ghost. In the context of the final scene, other competing considerations enter in that dilute, if not displace, the monolithic emphasis on revenge. Hamlet remembers his father only intermittently at the end of the play, and he remembers other things with greater emotional force. In particular, he is concerned with attending to his own memorial. By directing Horatio to "report me and my cause aright / To the unsatisfied" (5.2.339-40), he acts to commemorate himself, thus creating a wedge between his father's story and his own. The two Hamlets are not synonymous. Our final image of Hamlet as "sweet prince" (359) contrasts with the initial picture of the father as the archaic epic hero who "smote the sledged Polacks on the ice" (1.1.63); we value the difference partly because it costs Hamlet so dearly.

Horatio's collaboration is indispensable in effecting this difference between father and son, as the structure of the last scene emphasizes. The long exchange, beginning with the appeal "Horatio, I am dead" (5.2.338), comprises Hamlet's prominently positioned, final action. Speaking directly to his dead friend, Horatio acknowledges Hamlet's special identity as "sweet prince," thereby healing his "wounded name" (344) and granting the "felicity" (347) for which he had hoped: "Good night, sweet prince, / And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest!" (359-60). Some commentators conclude from Horatio's subsequent public rhetoric—"And let me speak to th'yet unknowing world / How these things came about. So you shall hear" (379-80)—that he will be an untrustworthy witness to Hamlet's inner story. But it is worth noting that Hamlet too uses the melodramatic voice when addressing a larger public: "You that look pale, and tremble at this chance, / That are but mutes or audience to this act" (334-35). It is the private exchange between Hamlet and Horatio that counts. Despite the reserve implied by Horatio's demurral that Hamlet "considers too curiously" (5.1.206), Horatio's capacity for intimacy is sufficient to make dramatically plausible and compelling his bond with Hamlet. He is there when Hamlet needs him: "If thou didst ever hold me in thy heart, / Absent thee from felicity a while" (5.2.346-47). Hamlet's plea to his friend recapitulates the ghost's heart-rending summons: "If thou didst ever thy dear father love" (1.5.23). But there is a difference. The play's final scene contrasts two versions of the transmission of heritage. Hamlet inherits from the ghost the obligation to revenge, which is consummated in the final scene. At the same time, Hamlet bequeaths his story to Horatio, thus preserving an alternate legacy of nonviolent fraternal cherishing. To bring out the limitations of the affection expressed in the Hamlet-Horatio bond, let us turn to Hamlet's relations with women.

Horatio has a double function in the play since he provides Hamlet with an alternative not only to the hectoring ghost but also to the crucial women in his life, Gertrude and Ophelia. Gertrude's exposed position in the play contrasts with the marginal maternal presence in Henry V. Isabel, the queen of France, renders herself invisible in the final scene by accommodating the wishes of the conquering hero, whose needs she places above those of her husband and her daughter. She facilitates Henry V's peace: "Happily a woman's voice may do some good./When articles too nicely urg'd may be stood upon" (5.2.93-94). She yields Katherine to his
wooing: "She hath good leave" (98). She ratifies their marriage in the most flattering rhetoric: "God, the best maker of all marriages, / Combine your hearts in one!" (359-60). Gertrude has far greater visibility in \textit{Hamlet} partly because she is deprived of this conventional maternal role when she sponsors marital love: "And for your part, Ophelia, I do wish / That your good beauties be the happy cause / Of Hamlet's wildness" (3.1.37-39).

Faced with the fact of Ophelia's death, Gertrude poignantly recognizes the denial of her "wish": "I hop'd thou shouldst have been my Hamlet's wife. / I thought thy bride-bed to have deck'd, sweet maid, / And not have strew'd thy grave" (5.1.244-46). But long before these "maimed rites" (219) for Ophelia, Gertrude is aware that her son's affections are not directed toward the younger woman and that she herself is a major cause of his "wildness": "I doubt it is no other but the main, / His father's death and our o'erhasty marriage" (2.2.56-57). If Isabel performs a disappearing act in \textit{Henry V} by blending with the hero's desires, Gertrude stands out because her remarriage calls attention to her own separate desires, desires that Hamlet finds painful to contemplate but nevertheless feels compelled to track down in lurid detail in his mother's closet. The "something" "rotten in the state of Denmark" (1.4.90) leads directly, through the ghost's metaphor, to the degraded sexuality in which Gertrude is trapped: "So lust, though to a radiant angel link'd, / Will sate itself in a celestial bed / And prey on garbage" (1.5.55-57). On this point, father and son agree: in his opening soliloquy Hamlet has already lamented his mother's sexual "frailty" (1.2.146).

Lacking a mother within the play, Laertes is forced to invent one to give full expression to the family integrity he defends:

\begin{verbatim}
That drop of blood that's calm proclaims me bastard,
Cries cuckold to my father, brands the harlot
Even here between the chaste un smirched brow
Of my true mother.
\end{verbatim}

(4.5.118-21)

By contrast, Hamlet renounces calmness because his "true mother" has made herself a "harlot" through remarriage and made him a "bastard" by dispossessing him of the maternal inheritance to which he feels entitled.\(^5\) His mourning is for loss of her as well as of his father. Hamlet makes a desperate effort to reverse the effects of Gertrude's marriage to Claudius and to recover her original "chaste unsmirched brow": "go not to my uncle's bed" (3.4.159). But the ideal image with which Hamlet harangues his mother is never restored in her. In the end, despite her generous gesture to him—"Here, Hamlet, take my napkin, rub thy brows. / The Queen carouses to thy fortune, Hamlet" (5.2.288-89)—he dismisses her with an unfeeling "Wretched queen, adieu!" (333), while putting himself in Horatio's care.

His actual mother having failed him, Hamlet finds an image of his "true mother" in the speech he selects for the player's recitation.\(^6\) The second half of this "passionate speech" (2.2.432) is as important as the first, as Hamlet's prompting indicates: "Say on, come to Hecuba" (501). Hecuba's maternal identity is established by the reference to "her lank and all o'er-teemed loins" (508). Despite the exhaustion of child bearing, her capacity for grief is inexhaustible. Her "bisson rheum" (506) contrasts sharply with Gertrude's false tears: "Ere yet the salt of most unrighteous tears / Had left the flushing in her galled eyes, / She married" (1.2.154-56). So great is Hecuba's sorrow that it is envisaged as inducing a sympathetic response in the cosmos, the gods themselves holding up the mirror to her maternal nature:

"The instant burst of clamor that she made,
Unless things mortal move them not at all,
Would have made milch the burning eyes of heaven,
And passion in the gods."
The imagery connects tears and milk, suggesting that the literal nurturance of the mother's breast is the epitome and source of compassionate feeling.\(^7\)

Her lust having disqualified Gertrude in Hamlet's eyes, she is unavailable to satisfy this nurturant image. By offering a comforting, solicitous presence for Hamlet, Horatio partially fills this need. In addition, Hamlet himself takes on the Hecuba image in his subsequent soliloquy:

> What's Hecuba to him, or he to Hecuba,  
> That he should weep for her? What would he do  
> Had he the motive and cue for passion  
> That I have? He would drown the stage with tears.

(2.2.559-62)

Like Lucrece, Hamlet finds in Hecuba a face "where all distress and dolor dwell'd" (\textit{Lucrece}, 1446)—an image adequate to his own extreme experience. Like Lucrece, he "shapes his sorrow to the beldame's woes" (\textit{Lucrece}, 1458). Together Hamlet and Horatio incorporate into their bond the compassion for which Hecuba is the model. But this compassionate use of the male bond is not fully satisfactory, for Hamlet's companionship with Horatio is less an alternative than a substitute for the original bond with his mother. As an attempt to do without the more highly charged maternal bond, the male bond, though moving, has a more limited emotional range.

We are thus reminded that Hamlet's investment in Horatio results from his failure to resolve his relations with Gertrude or Ophelia, both of whom arouse (and potentially could have fulfilled) a more intense need. Similarly, Othello turns to Iago only after the deeper bond with Desdemona fails, and Lear turns to male support only when he cannot have Cordelia. But even in disillusionment both men maintain their primary focus on the woman. Iago's difficulty in keeping Othello on the course of revenge—"But yet the pity of it, Iago! O, Iago, the pity of it, Iago!" (4.1.195-96)—suggests Othello's continuing attachment to the Desdemona he thinks he has lost. For Lear, everything hinges on Cordelia: "This feather stirs, she lives! If it be so, / It is a chance which does redeem all sorrows / That ever I have felt" (5.3.266-68). In Hamlet's case, however, the severance of ties to women is permanent; virtually all affection is transferred to Horatio.

The Hamlet-Horatio bond bespeaks a self-sufficiency that dissociates itself too readily from connections with women, as when Hamlet jokes about Osric's manners while feeding at the breast—"A did comply, sir, with his dug before'a suck'd it" (5.2.187-88)—or when he discounts his hesitation about the match with Laertes as "such a kind of gain-giving, as would perhaps trouble a woman" (215-16). The undercurrent of contempt for women and for dependence on them in these casual remarks had earlier been expressed with full force in the misogynist rage by which Hamlet ends his vulnerability to Ophelia.

Of course Hamlet has no monopoly on abuse of Ophelia, as Polonius's treatment of his daughter as an object to be exploited for his own needs shows. Polonius expects Laertes's "fair hour" (1.2.62) to include "drabbing" (2.1.26), indulgently blessing his son's right to "such wanton, wild, and usual slips / As are companions noted and most known / To youth and liberty" (22-24). However, both father and son regard it as their duty to insist that Ophelia avoid the "savageness in unreclaimed blood, / Of general assault" (34-35). Polonius reduces her to confusion about Hamlet's "many tenders / Of his affection" (1.3.99-100)—"I do not know, my lord, what I should think" (104)—and extracts her obedience to his peremptory command to end her "free and bounteous / audience" (93) with Hamlet—"I shall obey, my lord" (136). Polonius completes this manipulation of Ophelia by directing her to stage an audience designed to catch Hamlet's love: "I'll loose my daughter to him" (2.2.162). Yet though male control of a woman's destiny is a general problem in the society represented in this
play, Hamlet manifests this problem with a personal vehemence indicative of his special situation.

For Hamlet, no independent view of Ophelia is possible because he can see her only as an extension of his agonized relation to his mother. His alienation from Gertrude is already generalized in the outcry of his first soliloquy: "Frailty, thy name is woman!" (1.2.146). His attraction to Ophelia becomes automatically a casualty of this generalization. We hear of Hamlet's earlier poetic worship of her "excellent white bosom" (2.2.113) only in retrospect: "To the celestial and my soul's idol, the most beautified Ophelia" (110).

The moment when Polonius expects to trap Hamlet's "hot love" (2.2.132) is the moment when Hamlet renounces it, breaking the bond with Ophelia by his reiterated "Farewell" (3.1.132, 137, 140). His separation from Ophelia begins in self-accusation and ends in a misogynist outburst. His first sight of "The fair Ophelia" makes him conscious of "all my sins" (88-89). The failure of love is Hamlet's: "You should not have believ'd me, for virtue cannot so inoculate our old stock but we shall relish of it. I lov'd you not" (116-18). But Hamlet then turns his attention to the procreation that should be sanctified by marriage and proclaims an indiscriminate revulsion that embraces his mother, himself, and Ophelia, to whom he remonstrates: "Get thee to a nunn'ry, why wouldst thou be a breeder of sinners? I am myself indifferent honest, but yet I could accuse me of such things that it were better my mother had not borne me" (120-23). Even as he tries to sever the bond with his mother, he asserts it, while transferring to Ophelia the image of the contaminating mother. Hamlet's need for purity drives him to shift quickly from male deception to female deception, his final diatribe emphatically placing responsibility on women: "You jig and amble, and you lisp, you nickname God's creatures and make your wantonness your ignorance" (144-46).

In a play in which the image of a good woman is not convincingly restored to the male imagination, it proves easier to find a good man. Hamlet's adoration of Ophelia is transferred to Horatio, whom Hamlet suddenly sees as his new soul's idol: "Since my dear soul was mistress of her choice / And could of men distinguish her election./ Sh'hath seal'd thee for herself (3.2.63-65). In Hamlet's eyes, women are inherently two-faced: "God hath given you one face, and you make yourselves another" (3.1.143-44). In a world where love between men and women has become irrevocably duplicitous, sexuality can be avoided by turning to male ties to fashion a dependable bond. The stoic imperviousness of Horatio's relation to fortune—as "strumpet Fortune" (2.2.493) the epitome of inconstant woman—has a purity that recommends him. By contrast, Hamlet condemns Rosencrantz and Guildenstern for living "in the secret parts of Fortune" as "her privates" (2.2.235, 234).

The passionate transfer of trust to Horatio in act 3, scene 2, is underscored by Hamlet's treatment of Ophelia, which immediately follows. Though he is still cruel, his sexual antagonism during the play within a play has become a settled routine. The decrease in the emotional intensity of his misogynist rhetoric suggests that his detachment from Ophelia has been completed. Once formulated, Hamlet's severely disillusioned attitude toward women remains essentially constant. His fleeting recollection of his love after Ophelia's death confirms that his ideal image of woman is effectively beyond recovery. The brief assertion that "I lov'd Ophelia" (5.1.269) is relatively weak in a scene that gives the central emphasis to Hamlet's fraternal rivalry with Laertes. Hamlet does attain a sense of equanimity in the final act, but this positive spirit is carried primarily by his interactions with Horatio and Laertes. The release from the claustrophobic "nutshell" of Hamlet's misogynist "bad dreams" (2.2.254-56) is never dramatized, and the disturbed attitude toward female sexuality is neither squarely faced nor transformed and resolved.

This relationship between Hamlet and Horatio is reinforced by the parallel relationship between Hamlet and Laertes. "By the image of my cause," Hamlet sees "the portraiture of his" (5.2.77-78), though he might equally well have noted the analogy between his situation and Ophelia's. But it is Laertes rather than his sister who is the primary focus of Hamlet's "tow'ring passion" (80). Ophelia occasions the men's involvement with each other: "I lov'd Ophelia. Forty thousand brothers / Could not with all their quantity of love / Make up my sum. What wilt thou do for her?" (5.1.269-71). The dramatic force of this scene lies in the use of "quantity" and "sum" rather than of "love," as Hamlet turns Laertes's display into a competitive challenge that he can
win. Hamlet's scene with Laertes ends without reconciliation: his "I lov'd you ever" (290) goes unanswered. Yet their violent embrace in the grave is converted into brotherly alliance when the two absolve each other (without reference to Ophelia): "Exchange forgiveness with me, noble Hamlet. / Mine and my father's death come not upon thee, / Nor thine on me!" (5.2.329-31). Hamlet forgives Laertes, entrusts his story to Horatio, and even generously extends his "dying voice" (356) to Fortinbras. The redemptive spirit of the conclusion is thus created by Hamlet's enclosing himself in male fellowship, an envelopment to which we may critically respond: "Something too much of this."

Considering how much is destroyed and how much is left unresolved, it is remarkable the way the final scene insists on an afterlife for its hero. This positive dimension is not found in the ending of any other major tragedy until Antony and Cleopatra, where we do in part believe Cleopatra's "immortal longings" because they are counterbalanced by Octavius's reality, albeit "paltry." Yet Hamlet's "felicity" (5.2.347) cannot withstand the strict criterion of accountability evoked earlier by Claudius:

\[
\text{but'tis not so above:} \\
\text{There is no shuffling, there the action lies} \\
\text{In his true nature, and we ourselves compell'd,} \\
\text{Even to the teeth and forehead of our faults,} \\
\text{To give in evidence.}
\]

(3.3.60-64)

The final scene protects Hamlet by suspending critical evaluation of his felicity and the fraternal commitment that supports it. We must feel the authentic emotional power of the Hamlet-Horatio bond yet also note the way it deflects Hamlet from his problematic relations with women and allows him to escape all responsibility for his part in those disastrous relations. Hamlet's use of the feminine soul in his declaration to Horatio (3.2.63-65) makes explicit the incorporation of the feminine into the male bond. As in the androgyny of As You Like It, there is a crucial distinction between a man's appreciation of the feminine and his devaluation of actual women. The force of this distinction suggests how the insularity of the Hamlet-Horatio bond can be both affecting and misogynist, the latter because of the unacknowledged way the formation of their bond depends on an abusive dismissal of Ophelia.

Notes

1The emphatic quality of Hamlet's declaration is reinforced by the iteration: "In my heart's core, ay, in my heart of heart" (3.2.73). Harold Jenkins notes in the Arden edition of Hamlet (London: Methuen, 1982): "Both phrases mean the same, on the supposed etymology of 'core,' from L. 'cor': in the very centre of my heart" (p. 292).

2David Leverenz gives a useful analysis of the ghost's rhetoric in his essay "The Woman in Hamlet: An Interpersonal View," in Representing Shakespeare: New Psychoanalytic Essays, ed. Murray M. Schwartz and Coppélia Kahn (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980), pp. 110-28. In addition, it should be noted that the ghost's manipulative, guilt-inducing appeals to Hamlet's love in act 1, scene 5 have their parallel in Henry IV's style of taunting overstatement in his private audiences with Hal (1H4, 3.2; 2H4, 4.5.)

3In Shakespeare's Development and the Problem Comedies (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), Richard P. Wheeler nicely observes that Hamlet's impulse to resist the ghost is not in first instance a question of moral correctness but rather a matter of instinctive psychological self-defense:
Hamlet struggles against his own declared intention at a level deeper than his will and in a way not entirely explained by fear of repressed motives. He involuntarily seeks to preserve the potential integrity of self violated by his own attempt to take in and identify totally with the image of his father embodied in the ghost's command. This psychological resistance is analogous to the expulsion reaction in the biochemistry of an organism, set into action by the intrusion of alien tissues. Hamlet tries to perform a kind of self-transplant upon his own person, and the core of his individual self will not accept the foreign intruder.

(p. 194)

4This position is exemplified by Harold C. Goddard's chapter on the play in vol. 1 of The Meaning of Shakespeare, 2 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951). Goddard argues that Hamlet's invocation of "a divinity that shapes our ends" (5.2.10) strikes an absolutely false note that merely sugars over his murder of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Yet, despite Hamlet's use of divinity blithely to excuse his "conscience" (5.2.58), this image of divinity does not merely signal Hamlet's surrender to the ghost. The "divinity that shapes our ends" and the "special providence" (219-20) are different from the ghost because they signify his positive use of the contemptus mundi tradition in the graveyard. Much as we may regret the necessity of Hamlet's availing himself of it "betimes" (224), this cultural resource is an expression not simply of despair and resignation, but rather of a vital insight about mortality that gives Hamlet a larger perspective on "monarchs and outstretch'd heroes" (2.2.263-64) such as Alexander (5.1.197-212), "Imperious Caesar" (213-16), and even perhaps his majestical father. Nor does Hamlet passively submit to the shaping force of the divinity, as Goddard claims. Hamlet actively shapes his end, an end that includes a new power to shape language and to construct male bonds that enable forgiveness.

5As Hamlet dramatizes, men's sharply divided view of women as either chaste or sullied may be traced to a maternal base: behind the extremes of good and bad women lie the ideal and terrible mothers. Dorothy Dinnerstein's The Mermaid and the Minotaur: Sexual Arrangements and Human Malaise (New York: Harper & Row, 1976) and Nancy Chodorow's The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978) portray the male's divided view of women as activated by asymmetrical parenting, in which the mother is exclusively responsible for child rearing, thus the son's dependency on the mother for total satisfaction and trust and concomitantly his anxiety about the total betrayal and separation. This initial relationship becomes the model by which subsequent women are experienced in the extreme terms of good mother or terrible mother, or an oscillation between the two. However, Adriennne Rich criticized the Dinnerstein-Chodorow analysis in "Motherhood: The Contemporary Emergency and the Quantum Leap" (1978), in On Lies, Secrets, and Silence (New York: W. W. Norton, 1979), pp. 259-73 and—more sharply—in "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," Signs 5 (1980): 531-60. Rich argues that male involvement in child rearing would be inadequate to eliminate misogyny as a social force. In Rich's view, Dinnerstein and Chodorow underestimate the problem and vastly overestimate the efficacy of their solution.

6According to T. S. Eliot's logic in "Hamlet and His Problems" (1919), in Selected Essays: 1917-1932 (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1932), 121-26, Gertrude is too small an object to account for the magnitude of the emotion Hamlet expends in relation to her; therefore, his emotion must refer to something else that we can never discover. But, in encouraging the search for a more "objective correlative" to replace Gertrude, Eliot diverts us from one of the direct causes of Hamlet's alienation. The play makes clear that the human family—"With blood of fathers, mothers daughters, sons" (2.2.458)—is Hamlet's "cue for passion" (561), and in particular, as the image of Hecuba attests, his mother is one focus of his emotional distress. A useful antidote to Eliot's essay is Rebecca Smith's "A Heart Cleft in Twain: The Dilemma of Shakespeare's Gertrude," in The Woman's Part: Feminist Criticism of Shakespeare, ed. Carolyn Ruth Swift Lenz, Gayle Greene, and Carol Thomas Neely (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1980), pp. 194-210. Smith suggests that the way to approach the "excess" that troubled Eliot is to show how the disparity between Hamlet's view
of his mother and Gertrude's own selfimage contributes to our understanding of Hamlet's needs rather than to Shakespeare's "artistic failure." The predominance of the male hero creates a situation in which the male is the perceiver and the women is the perceived: images of women cannot therefore be read as objective types but to a significant degree must be treated as products of the male psyche.

This imagery is developed in *Macbeth* where Lady Macbeth literalizes her metaphor "the milk of human kindness" (1.5.17) by attempting to turn the "milk" in "my woman's breasts" to "gall" in order to be unkind (47-48). This self-imposed malevolent version of maternity does not "unsex" (41) her but continues her mother-centered identity.

Harold Jenkins, the Arden editor of *Hamlet*, rightly argues that Hamlet's reaction to Ophelia is not explained by her refusal of his letters (pp. 149-50) or by Hamlet's discovery of Polonius behind the arras in the nunnery scene (note to 3.1.130-31 on p. 283, and a longer note on pp. 496-97). Hamlet's rejection of Ophelia proceeds from more deep-seated motives than such specific causation would indicate.

Valerie Traub (essay date 1988)


[In the following excerpt, Traub discusses the erotic nature of male anxiety regarding women in *Hamlet*, asserting that this anxiety is only relieved through the death of the woman, as in the case of Ophelia, or through the woman's discarding of her sexuality in favor of chastity, as Hamlet instructs Gertrude to do.]

In *Hamlet*, Gertrude's adultery and incest—the uncontrollability, in short, of her sexuality—are, in Hamlet's mind, projected outward to encompass the potential of such contamination in all liaisons between men and women. Gertrude's adultery turns all women into prostitutes and all men into potential cuckolds. Hamlet's entire world is contracted into "an unweeded garden / That's grown to seed, things rank and gross in nature / Possess it merely." In this vile yet seductive garden, sexually threatening women poison vulnerable and unwitting men. Thus, women, through their erotic power, adjudicate life and death—a connection nicely summed up by the "Mousetrap" player who reads the speech inserted by Hamlet in the play performed to "catch the conscience of the King": "A second time I kill my husband dead, / When second husband kisses me in bed" (II.ii.605; III.ii.184-85).

The threat posed by Gertrude's sexuality is paranoiacally projected onto Ophelia, whom Hamlet exhorts: "Get thee to a nunn'ry, why wouldst thou be a breeder of sinners? . . . I could accuse me of such things that it were better my mother had not bourne me" (III.i.120-23). As the culmination of this speech makes clear, those "things" of which Hamlet could accuse himself are less the pride, ambition, and knavery that he mentions, as they are his suspicion that he, like his father before him, will be cuckolded: "Get thee to a nunn'ry, farewell. Or if thou wilt needs marry, marry a fool, for wise men know well enough what monsters you make of them" (III.i.136-39). As the pun on nunnery and brothel makes clear, Hamlet is not concerned with Ophelia's ability to contaminate other men; trapped as he is within the boundaries of the Oedipal relation, Hamlet's paranoia extends only to himself and his beloved father. And women make men into monsters, the Elizabethan euphemism for cuckolds, because they deceive. Hamlet rages:

I have heard of your paintings, well enough. God hath given you one face, and you make yourselves another. You jig and amble, and you lisp, you nickname God's creatures and make your wantonness your ignorance. Go to, I'll no more on't, it hath made me mad. I say we will have no moe marriage.

(III.i.141-47)
No more marriage because all marriage is madness and whoredom—degrading to both parties, but especially
to the man who never knows who else has slept between his sheets. And not only is marriage likened to
whoredom, but Hamlet himself becomes a whore as he, unable to carry out the revenge thrust upon him by his
father's Ghost, "Must like a whore unpack [his] heart with words / And fall a-cursing like a very drab, / A
stallion" [male prostitute] (II.iii.585-87).

However potent Hamlet's fear of cuckoldry, one senses something else behind his vituperation of Ophelia: an
anxiety associated with the sexual act itself. The language with which Hamlet describes sexuality is riddled
throughout with metaphors of contagion and disease; his mother's hidden adultery and incest are imagined as
an "ulcerous place" that "infects unseen" (III.iv.147-49). For Hamlet, who early asks, "And shall I couple
hell?" (I.v.93)—the phraseology of which suggests the possibility of coupling with hell—all sex is unnatural.

Hamlet's sexual nausea finds its antecedent in his father's Ghost, who characterizes Gertrude thus: "But virtue,
as it never will be moved, / Though lewdness court it in a shape of heaven / So lust, though to a radiant angel
link'd, / Will sate itself in a celestial bed / And prey on garbage" (I.v.53-57). Here the sexually dualistic
ideology that divides women into lustful whores and radiant angels collapses upon itself, revealing the fear
upon which it is based: Women are imagined either as angels or whores as a psychological defense against the
uncomfortable suspicion that underneath, the angel is a whore. The collapse of this defensive structure
unleashes precisely the masculine aggression it was originally built to contain. Even the Ghost's ostensible
protection of Gertrude from Hamlet's wrath is sexually sadistic: "Taint not thy mind, nor let thy soul contrive /
Against thy mother aught. Leave her to heaven, / And to those thorns that in her bosom lodge / To prick and
sting her" (I.v.85-88). Gertrude's conscience is imagined as an aggressive phallus, pricking and stinging her
female breasts, in a repossession, replication, and reprojection of the action that simultaneously effeminized
King Hamlet, and deprived him of his life and wife: "The serpent that did sting thy father's life / Now wears
his crown" (I.v.38-39), crown symbolizing both his kingship and his wife's genitalia.

Identified as Hamlet is with his father, it is small wonder that Ophelia merges, in Hamlet's mind, with
Gertrude, and that violence toward both women becomes his only recourse. Although Hamlet's violence
remains verbal rather than physical, Ophelia's death is as much an outcome of Hamlet's rage as it is an
expression of her grief, madness, or self-destruction. Killed off before she can deceive or defile Hamlet, it is
clear that only in death can Ophelia-as-whore regain the other half of her dichotomized being, chaste virgin.
Contaminated in life by the taint of Gertrude's adultery, Ophelia reclaims sexual desirability only as a dead,
but perpetual, virgin.

In our first view of Ophelia, Laertes warns his sister of the unlikelihood of Hamlet's fulfilling her expectations
of betrothal:

Then weigh what loss your honor may sustain
If with too credent ear you list his songs,
Or lose your heart, or your chaste treasure open
To his unmast'red importunity.
Fear it, Ophelia, fear it, my dear sister,
And keep you in the rear of your affection,
Out of the shot and danger of desire.
The chariest maid is prodigal enough
If she unmask her beauty to the moon.
Virtue itself scapes not calumnious strokes.
The canker galls the infants of the spring
Too oft before their buttons be disclos'd,
And in the morn and liquid dew of youth
Contagious blastments are most imminent.
As imagined by Laertes, Ophelia's genitalia is a "chaste treasure," a "button," that must be clasped shut against the "unmaste'rd importunity," the "contagious blastments," the "shot and danger" of masculine desire. Laertes's language interweaves Hamlet's equation of sexuality and disease (canker, contagion) with his own view of sexuality as masculine aggression (importunity, shot and danger, strokes, blastments). Ophelia's reply, "'Tis in my memory lock'd, / And you yourself shall keep the key of it" (I.iii.85-86), suggests not only that Laertes's advice is "lock'd" in her memory, but also that Laertes alone possesses the key to her properly immured "chaste treasure."

As if to underscore the importance of Laertes's warning, in the next scene Ophelia is interrogated by Polonius, who is similarly concerned with the status of his daughter's chastity. His accusation that "you yourself / Have of your audience been most free and bounteous" (I.iii.93-94) links Ophelia's personhood (her audience) with the sign of her femaleness (her genitalia) through the reiteration of Laertes's metaphors of closed and open space. To be "free and bounteous" with one's person is to risk opening one's "chaste treasure." When Claudius later asks Polonius to repeat the advice he gave to Ophelia regarding Hamlet's advances, Polonius replies: "That she should lock herself from his resort" (II.ii.143). The message of father and son is clear: The proper female sexuality is closed, contained, "lock'd." In the graveyard scene—the last scene in which her presence is required—Ophelia's dead, virginal body is fetishized by Hamlet and Laertes alike. As Ophelia's funeral procession reaches her newly dug grave, Laertes exclaims, "Lay her i'th'earth, / And from her fair and unpolluted flesh / May violets spring!" (V.i.239-40). Soon thereafter he leaps on top of her casket: "Hold off the earth a while, / Till I have caught her once more in mine arms" (V.i.249-50). Such passion, of course, incites Hamlet to claim his place as chief mourner. "Dost thou come here to whine? / To outface me with leaping in her grave?" (V.i.277-78).

Critics largely focus on the grave as a site of masculine competition, neglecting to mention that Ophelia's grave becomes the only "bed" upon which Hamlet is able to express his sexual desire. And yet, it is neither the right to mourn Ophelia, nor the right to enjoy her sexual body (that is, her dynamic, self-expressive sexuality), that is actually being contested; rather, Laertes and Hamlet fight over the right to appropriate Ophelia's chastity. Fetishized to the extent that it is utterly divorced from the rest of her being, Ophelia's chastity embodies, as it were, a masculine fantasy of a "female essence" wonderfully devoid of that which makes women so problematic: change, movement, inconstancy, unpredictability—in short, life. The conflict between Hamlet and Laertes is over the right (and rite) of sexual possession, and occurs only after Ophelia's transformation into a fully possessible object. The earlier punning of the gravedigger seems eerily premonitory as he responds to Hamlet's query regarding who is to be buried in the newly turned grave: "One that was a woman, but, rest her soul, she's dead" (V.i.135). No longer a woman, Ophelia is no longer likely to incite sexual anxiety; she is, however, a likely object to figure in sexual fantasies of masculine prowess. In addition to masculine competition, then, the conflict between Hamlet and Laertes suggests an underlying necrophiliac fantasy. As a sexualized yet chaste corpse, Ophelia signifies not only the connection between sexuality and death previously explored in Romeo and Juliet, but also suggests that sexuality is finally safely engaged in only with the dead. Earlier, Hamlet spoke of his own death as "a consummation / Devoutly to be wish'd" (III.i.62-63), narcissistically linking his own death with sexual intercourse, and imagining both as the perfection of his desire. Here, the fear shared by Hamlet and Laertes of a dynamic, expressive female sexuality culminates in the imposition of stasis on that which threatens to bring sexual (and for Hamlet, metaphysical) chaos, and in the desire, having acquired a fully immobile object, to possess her fully.

In Othello, as both Greenblatt and Snow brilliantly argue, the need to suppress the anxieties that female sexuality engenders is tragically manipulated into the murder of the woman who elicits those anxieties. As critics have noted, Othello is both emotionally vulnerable to Desdemona and ambivalent about women in general, and it is precisely because his anxieties are multivalent and mutually reinforcing that Othello is susceptible to Iago's seduction. Like Brabantio's premonition of Desdemona's elopement—"This accident is
not unlike my dream, / Belief of it oppresses me already" (I.i.142-43)—and Hamlet's suspicion of Gertrude's crimes—"O, my prophetic soul!" (I.v.40)—Othello's belief in woman's power of deception lies just under the surface of his idolization. Othello himself exclaims in reaction to Iago's intimations, "Think my lord! By heaven, he echoes me, / As if there were some monster in his thought / Too hideous to be shown" (III.iii.94-96, emphasis mine), suggesting that Iago echoes not merely Othello's words, but his thoughts. Indeed, having betrayed her father, Desdemona is suspect to all men except the similarly manipulated Cassio. Warns Brabantio: "Look to her, Moor, if thou hast eyes to see: / She has deceived her father and may thee" (I.iii.292-93). And Iago voices the same refrain: "She did deceive her father, marrying you" (III.iii.210).

That a woman may "seem" to be one thing and yet may "be" another comes to signify, in the masculine mind of Othello, woman's very existence. Whereas usually women are presumed to be either virgins or whores, in Othello the split within each woman between "seeming" and "being" suggests that women are simultaneously "seeming" to be virgins and "being" actual whores. In Hamlet, we have seen that the breakdown of the carefully contrived sexual dichotomy (wherein virgin and whore are mutually exclusive terms) unleashes Hamlet's aggression toward Gertrude and Ophelia. Importantly, however, Hamlet's suspicions never obtain the status of existential Truth; they never assume irrevocable judgment. Gertrude, though an adulteress, may be redeemed if she avoids the marriage bed. And Ophelia's madness and death rectify her virginity, as Laertes testifies: "Lay her i'th'earth / And from her fair and unpolluted flesh / May violets spring! I tell thee, churlish priest, / A minist'ring angel shall my sister be / When thou liest howling" (V.i.238-41).

The price of such redemption, however, is a complete capitulation to masculine terms as well as the resurrection of the faulty structure of sexual dualism. Hamlet explicitly instructs his mother to re-form her being in the shape of a virgin:

\[\text{Hamlet: Confess yourself to heaven,}
\text{Repent what's past, avoid what is to come,}
\text{And do not spread compost on the weeds To make them ranker. . . .}
\text{Queen: O Hamlet, thou hast cleft my heart in twain.}
\text{Hamlet: O throw away the worser part of it,}
\text{And live the purer with the other half.}
\text{Goodnight, but go not to my uncle's bed}
\text{Assume a virtue if you have it not.}
\]

(III.iv.149-58)

In order to allay masculine suspicions and anxieties—in order to not "be" a whore—Gertrude must throw away her "worser" part, her sexuality, and assume married chastity, an appropriate response to Hamlet's call for "no moe marriage." . . .

Notes

12 It also turns all sons into bastards. At least part of Hamlet's anxiety is about his own legitimacy.

13Hamlet, I.ii.135-37. All Shakespeare quotations are from The Riverside Shakespeare, ed. G. Blakemore Evans et al. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974) and will be cited hereafter parenthetically in the text.

14 For analysis of Hamlet's Oedipal conflict, see Ernest Jones, Hamlet and Oedipus (Garden City: Doubleday, 1954). I find the most persuasive evidence of Oedipal conflict in the ambiguous syntax of the following lines spoken by Hamlet: "How stand I then, / That have a father kill'd, a mother stain'd" (IV.iv.56-57). Unlike
Prince Hamlet, who is concerned almost exclusively with his own condition, the soldier Othello extends his paranoia into a concern for his brothers: "Yet she must die, else she'll betray more men" (V.ii.6). Here, male bonding rather than masculine competition overshadows the heterosexual relation.

15 My interpretation depends on reading both "lust" and "radiant angel" as referring to Gertrude. "[R]adiant angel" is equally compelling as King Hamlet's self-characterization. I suggest that the passage should be read both ways, as a fine example of Shakespeare's overdetermined use of language.

16 Gohlke also sees Hamlet as deflecting the violence he feels toward his mother onto Ophelia, and, like me, sees Ophelia's madness and death as a direct outcome of his rage: "It is not his mother whom Hamlet kills (Claudius takes care of that) but Ophelia. Only when she is dead, moreover, is he free to say clearly that he loved her" (p. 173). Gohlke, however, does not pursue the psychological implications of Hamlet's inability to love the living Ophelia.

17 Perhaps the image of a locked female sexuality is a holdover from the medieval chastity belt.

18 The grave in Hamlet is symbolically and geographically analogous to the marriage bed in Othello. A comparison of both the grave and marriage bed to the tomb of Romeo and Juliet extends the implications of each. The tomb is characterized by the Friar as the earth's womb, to which all humankind must return (II.iii.9-12). The implication of all three plays is that women, because of their procreative capacities, are to be blamed for male mortality. Apparently, women grant less the gift of life than the curse of death: men are condemned to live only to die.

19 The OED defines "consummation" as "the completion of marriage by sexual intercourse" for as early as 1530. Other early meanings include (a) "That act of completing, accomplishing, fulfilling, finishing, or ending," (b) "Completion, conclusion, as an event or condition; end; death," (c) "The action of perfecting; the condition of full and perfect development, perfection, acme," and (d) "A condition in which desires, aims, and tendencies are fulfilled; crowning or fitting end; goal." It seems to me that all of these definitions serve to expand the resonances of Hamlet's desire. (Emphasis mine.)

20 See Gohlke, Greenblatt, and Snow. . . .

Lawrence Danson (essay date 1993)


[In the following essay, Danson reviews points in the cultural history of Hamlet when Hamlet's gender has "been defined in unusual ways." Danson discusses in particular three different portrayals of Hamlet in which his feminine nature is a central aspect of his characterization.]

'A was a man. Take him for all in all, / I shall not look upon his like again'(1.2.186-7).1 Among all the doubts, fears, uncertainties attendant on his father's death, there's this for Hamlet to contend with too, this hinted anxiety about keeping up the old gender-roles. Where once men were men, and women—hanging upon them as if increase of appetite did grow where it did feed—women, there now rules an ambiguous queen-king: bidding Claudius farewell for England, Hamlet calls him 'dear mother', because 'Father and mother is man and wife, man and wife is one flesh, and so my mother'(4.3.51-4). And Hamlet himself? In this essay I want to look at some moments in Hamlet's cultural history when the Prince's own sex or gender (the slippage between those terms is part of that history) have been defined in unusual ways. Apart from their occasional bizarreness, they interest me because they suggest that Hamlet, that great drama of patriarchal piety and misogynistic rage, has had under certain circumstances the power to shake the most firmly-planted binary representations.
Or perhaps those representations were ripe for shaking from the start? Several recent critics, including Thomas Laqueur and Stephen Greenblatt, have drawn attention to a possibility latent, at least, within Renaissance ideas about sexual anatomy.2 Ian Maclean concisely reports the basic case:

In Aristotelian and Galenic terms, woman is less fully developed than man. Because of lack of heat in generation, her sexual organs have remained internal, she is incomplete, colder and moister in dominant humours, and unable to 'concoct' perfect semen from blood. Two axioms are implied here: that the hottest created thing is the most perfect, and that a direct comparison can be made between the genitalia of man and woman in function, number and form.3

Like the egg and the chicken, a woman in this scheme is a man in potentia, as nature herself, striving toward perfection, strives to make all things male. This is heady stuff, though Maclean himself, like the classical and Renaissance writers he surveys, goes cautiously: he notes that there are few attested cases of sex change in the Renaissance, that they are considered inconclusive by the physiologists who treat them 'with great circumspection', and that all involve women changing into men (38-9). Still, a little of such instability goes a long way, and Stephen Orgel's bold extrapolation from the evidence may conveniently introduce my essay about Hamlet's vicissitudes in the sex-gender system: 'The frightening part of the teleology [that leads from female to male] for the Renaissance mind . . . is precisely the fantasy of its reversal, the conviction that men can turn into—or be turned into—women; or perhaps more exactly, can be turned back into women, losing the strength that enabled the male potential to be realized in the first place.'4

I

Jacqueline Rose has asked 'How far the woman has been at the center, not only of the internal drama, but also of the critical drama—the controversy about meaning and language—which [Hamlet] has provoked?'5 In her argument, T. S. Eliot's dissatisfaction with the form of Hamlet, and Eliot's and Freud's invocation of the Mona Lisa to characterize the play, bespeak a male-centred desire for clarity and order which is threatened by the female—literally, threatened by Gertrude, but figuratively also by 'woman's that which is inimical to the male desire for clarity and order. Rose is perhaps too hard on one of the men in the case: Eliot does not, as she claims, blame Gertrude for failing to measure up as an 'objective correlative'; even he knew that the problem lies in the male fantasist, not in the object of his fantasy. But Rose's point is suggestive: a woman has occasionally figured at the centre of Hamlet, and on some of those occasions the 'woman' was Hamlet.6

Beginning in the late eighteenth century, Hamlet's rougher, more murderous edges were smoothed away. His delay, no longer a matter of craft or madness, was softened by the pale cast of thought. In this introspective Hamlet two conflicting nineteenth-century representations of gender meet in one line: Hamlet the thinker is partly bred out of the stereotype of the Romantic hero, voyaging through strange seas of thought; but merely thinking on the event is passive, and passivity—in the commonplace binary scheme, more potent in the nineteenth century than it had been in the seventeenth—was conventionally aligned with femininity, so that the Romantic Hamlet could also be seen as a womanly Hamlet. Goethe's influential description, with its strikingly gendered metaphors, may stand for the many it spawned: 'Here is an oak-tree planted in a costly vase, which should have received into its bosom only lovely flowers; the roots spread out, the jar is shivered to pieces. A beautiful, pure, noble, and most moral nature, without the strength of nerve which makes the hero, sinks beneath a burden which it can neither bear nor throw off . . .?'7 The phallic roots of the oak-tree Hamlet shatter his precious but fragile containing form. Ophelia, with her flowers, might (especially in nineteenth-century productions) fit such a container; but Goethe's male hero is in self-conflict with the virtues, conventionally gendered female, of loveliness, purity, and superior morality. This Hamlet cannot contain himself: either he will self-destruct as his masculine-defining qualities (like the physical apparatus of male sex in the Renaissance scheme) grow outwards, or he will become his own metonym, Goethe's precious container rather than the thing contained.
The feminized Romantic Hamlet appears by explicit allusion in Hazlitt's description (1817): his character is made up of undulating lines; it has [like Perdita] the yielding flexibility of "a wave o'th'sea".8 Hamlet's association with the feminine becomes clearer in the more extravagant flights of Victorian character-criticism. As critics fill the margins of the play-text they domesticate Hamlet—literally, they move him into the traditionally female space of the home; and in that space his masculine attire merely usurps his nature. John Weiss's (1876) fantasy is most touching in this regard, and worth quoting at length. Hamlet with Ophelia becomes David Copperfield with Dora, a man attracted to a softly nurturing, lethean world of escape from his masculine social role:

His love for Ophelia was the most mastering impulse of his life; it stretched like a broad, rich domain, down to which he came from the shadowy places of his private thoughts to fling himself in the uncheck'd sunshine and revel in the limpid path of feeling. How often had he gone to let her smile strip off the shadow of this thought, and expose him to untroubled nature! The moisture of her eyes refreshed his questioning; her phrases answered it beyond philosophy; a maidenly submission of her hand renewed his confidence; an unspoken sympathy of her reserve, that flowed into the slightest hints and permissions of her body, nominated him as lover and disenfranchised him as thinker; and a sunshower seemed to pelt through him to drift his vapors off.9

Weiss dwells with almost voyeuristic pleasure on those 'hints and permissions of [Ophelia's] body'. In the 'broad, rich domain' where Hamlet 'revel[s] in the limpid bath of feeling', Hamlet's own shape virtually dissolves into that of the woman who refreshes him. The dreamy scene of escape from a world where thinking and feeling are rigidly divided between male and female gives eloquent evidence of the burden of Victorian masculinity. In Weiss's fantasy, not only Ophelia but Hamlet too becomes a Victorian 'angel in the house', 'disenfranchised . . . as thinker'—a consummation devoutly to be wished.

Goethe, Hazlitt, and Weiss are all quoted in the Variorum edition. But the full truth was not announced until after the publication of that treasure-trove of psychologized, domesticated Hamlets. Indeed it was announced in a book dedicated to its editor, Horace Howard Furness, and published, like it, by Lippincott of Philadelphia; and for all its looniness it may be seen as a fitting culmination of Furness's work. The book is called The Mystery of Hamlet, by Edward P. Vining (1881). In it Vining goes the illogical next step from gender-stereotype to sexual fact: Hamlet is not only a 'womanly man' but 'in very deed a woman, desperately striving to fill a place for which she was by nature unfitted . . .' (59):

if we imagine that the poet here portrayed a woman incapable of accomplishing the revenge which the perturbed spirit of her father had imposed upon her, driven to the borders of distraction by unbearable burdens, suffering from a hopeless love that she might never reveal, tortured by jealousy, sorely sensitive to all a woman's natural faults, and incensed far more at the sacrifice of personal purity made by her mother in marrying again so speedily, than even by the murder of her father; shrinking from the mortal struggle with the king, fearing bloodshed, and viewing the possibility of her own death with a shuddering horror, and hence anxious to find some escape, some easier method of fulfilling her duty; that which before seemed at variance with all ordinary modes of thinking now becomes an exhibition of the deepest human feeling. (75)

Contemplating his portrait of a woman trapped in a man's social body, Vining asks,'Shall human pity ever sound the depths of woe that engulfed this unhappy life?'(91).

A critic who seriously proposes that Hamlet is a woman will seem either mad or, with the right theory behind him, very modern. In fact Vining was just quintessentially the nineteenth-century literary amateur, with a penchant for autodidactic intellectual extravagance. After The Mystery of Hamlet, he wrote his 787-page
masterpiece, *An Inglorious Columbus; or, Evidence that Hwui Shan and a Party of Buddhist Monks from Afghanistan Discovered America in the 5th Century A.D.* (New York, 1885); then, with more professional seemliness—he was by trade a railway man—he wrote *The Necessity for a Classification of Freight* in 1886, and in 1906 his religious treatise, *Jacob, or Israel's New Name*. (In 1890 he edited *Hamlet* for The Bankside Shakespeare.) Along the way, at the age of thirty-nine, he received the Master of Arts from Yale, and at the age of sixty-one, the Doctor of Laws from William Jewell College. Vining's solution to the mystery of Hamlet is worth remembering for several reasons. His fantasy of a female Hamlet, however idiosyncratic, is also a cultural product; his ideas about gender—what constitutes a real woman, what a real man—are recognizably not his alone. And those ideas can interestingly be compared both to some Renaissance ideas and to some modern ideas. Furthermore, Vining's little book has had a surprisingly vigorous afterlife. It comes up one June day in 1906 in the library in Dublin, where John Eglinton tells Stephen Dedalus 'that an actress played Hamlet for the fourhundredandeighth time last night in Dublin. Vining held that the prince was a woman.'

In *Ernest Jones's Hamlet and Oedipus*, Vining is preserved in a footnote, paired with the critic who proved that Hamlet was overweight. But as Jones's Freudian theory bore cinematic fruit in Olivier's 1948 film—to which I will return—so too Vining's theory was once magnificently justified on screen. And to that, too, I will return.

But Vining first—who disarmingly sneaks up on his radical thesis by seeming to propose only the Romantic commonplace that 'the charms of Hamlet's mind are essentially feminine in their nature' (47)—is explicit about what constitutes the 'essentially feminine'. For instance, 'Gentleness, and more or less dependence upon others, are inherent qualities of the feminine nature, and Hamlet possessed both' (47). He also possessed other, more disturbing feminine qualities. Woman, for instance, 'with less strength to accomplish her desires by straightforward action', uses instead shrewdness, subtlety, indirection, and dissimulation; thus Hamlet's feigned madness and his use of the play-within-a-play are stratagems that a woman might attempt, and that are far more in keeping with a feminine than with a masculine nature. Vining cites the authority of the great psychologist Dr Henry Maudsley, who also found that Hamlet was by nature something of a dissimulator, —that faculty having been born in him... Maudsley's clinical observations (quoted by Vining) provide an etiology for the development of feminine traits in men: 'we not uncommonly observe the character of the mother, with her emotional impulses and subtle but scarce conscious shifts, in the individual when young, while the calm deliberation and conscious determination of the father come out more plainly as he grows older'. Thus for the Victorian psychologist, as for Renaissance Galenic theorists, femininity is a stage in the teleological development of masculinity; and Dr Maudsley's female-minded dissimulating Hamlet is a case of arrested gender development.

But Vining goes further; his amassing of supposedly essential female traits prepares the way for his—and, as he traces it, Shakespeare's—transition from a merely female-minded Hamlet to Hamlet as a woman in perfect fact. Hamlet's fear of death is a female trait. His 'impulsiveness' is another; so is his 'love of obtaining the advantage in a wordy warfare, which induces him to tantalize and mock at Polonius and Osric' (54); also his use of 'pretty oaths' and his fear of breaking into tears (55). Like a woman, Hamlet is 'small and delicate' (as we know because he contrasts himself disparagingly with Hercules), but also 'at least moderately plump'. He has a woman's daintiness and sensitiveness to weather and perfumes (because he notices that 'the air bites shrewdly' and because he is revolted by the smell of Yorick's skull). He suffers from hysteria, the female malady (77-8). Even his misogyny proves he is a woman: '. . . such is the abhorrence which he expresses of [women's] frailties and weaknesses that it irresistibly suggests the question, Is not this more like the bitterness of one woman against the failings of another, than like the half compassion, "more in sorrow than in anger", with which a man regards a feminine weakness?' Hamlet's indictment of Ophelia in the nunneray-scene is so ungentlemanly that only a woman could have done it: 'Did ever a noble youth so abuse and insult a lovely gentle girl?' (57).

If Vining is clear about the fact that women dislike other women, he is equally clear about the fact that men like women: 'The Creator has implanted in humanity a subtle attraction toward the opposite sex, which is in a man, and particularly a man of Hamlet's age, invests all womankind with a tender charm' (55). Hamlet is
different—not only doesn't he like women, he does like men:'In Hamlet . . . we find an entire inversion of what should have been expected. His admiration is expended upon men and masculine perfection alone'(55). Now,'inversion'(so innocently slipped into the preceding extract) was to become a common term for same-sex attraction during the 1890s, the period during which homosexuality came increasingly to be seen not as an aberration of conduct but as an identity. The word'homosexuality'itself, coined by a Swiss doctor in 1869, also did not enter English until the 1890s. In Vining's day,'the Love that dare not speak its name'actually had no legitimizing name to speak: the available words of legal condemnation, like'sodomy','buggery', and their cognates, refer to actions that express a wilful departure from the supposed norms of a man's'essential'sexual identity; the creation (or rediscovery) of an idea of male sexuality which could be expressed appropriately in the acts to which those words refer was only in progress at the time Vining was solving Hamlet's mystery.

Still, Vining's occlusion of any third possibility, beyond men-love-women and women-love-men, suggests a notable blindness. Vining's fellow American, Walt Whitman, had already provided a role-model and a defining term,'adhesiveness', for writers struggling to define a specifically gay consciousness. Only a few years after Vining's book, in 1889, Oscar Wilde published'The Portrait of Mr W. H.', his playful'neo-platonic'solution to the mystery of Shakespeare's sonnets. At Wilde's first trial, Mr Carson (for the defence) asked Wilde,'I believe you have written an article to show that Shakespeare's sonnets were suggestive of unnatural vice?'Wilde's reply must count among his very best paradoxes:'On the contrary I have written an article to show that they are not. I objected to such a perversion being put upon Shakespeare.' The idea of a love between men which is not'unnatural', not a'perversion'was, in 1895, a paradox almost (but, as Wilde's reply shows, not quite) beyond the reach of linguistic possibility.

Vining's assumption, therefore, that a man who likes other men is by definition a woman, was culturally the easier conclusion to reach than the conclusion that he was gay. But it also suggests that some versions of nineteenth-century misogyny (like Vining's) are displaced versions of homophobia—by which I mean not only hatred of gays, but fear of being gay, thus being femininized. In any event, it allows Vining to play safely with the wonderful notion that Hamlet's true love is not Ophelia but Horatio:'His eulogy of Horatio in the third act is characterized by a warmth of fondness and admiration far greater than is natural between friends of the same sex'(65). Vining notices that Hamlet's line, in the folio text, about'disprized love'is missing from the first quarto and appears in the second quarto as'despized love'. As a textual theorist, Vining is very modern: he finds that the variation reflects Shakespeare's own revision of his texts, and that it makes a critical point:

Horatio did not despise the affection of Hamlet, but he can have had but the dimmest apprehension of the depth of Hamlet's whole-hearted love and never suspected the true cause of the latter's confidence in him. Hence Hamlet could not but have felt that his love was and must ever remain'disprized'. (65)

With the sad story of Hamlet's love for Horatio at its heart, the Victorian tragedy of Hamlet, Princess of Denmark, is now complete: We learn that on the day of old Hamlet's combat with old Fortinbras, Gertrude gave birth to a daughter; that fearing old Hamlet's death, and a dynastic crisis, she gave out the false information that a royal son had been born; and that,'This step once hastily taken could not be recalled . . . There could be no retreat, no change: the part once taken must be played through to the end'(83). And that end for Vining's version of the Romantic feminized Hamlet is inevitably tragic:'Hamlet must die, for the "cursed spite" under which he was born was such that for his woes there could be no other end than death'(95).

Vining calls Hamlet a woman, but it would be more accurate to say that Vining's Hamlet is a man emasculated lated by another man's competitive scrutiny. Reading the opening pages of his sober-seeming analysis, segueing then into the more bizarre passages of his revisionary tale, we never quite give up the idea of the man-Hamlet; that idea is constantly worked on, transformed: the woman-Hamlet literally depends on it. (Hence the problem of pronouns, as when I say, he is a woman.) Discovering the female Hamlet is an operation of power: as you peer into Hamlet, can you see that this trait or that is really a feminine trait? Can
you see that he's only trying to pass? Can you find him out? When you have, you can, like Vining, submit him to your pity: you can turn the nineteenth century's great symbol of intellectual power into an object of sexual pleasure, a woman. You can simultaneously unfix the restrictive binary of sexual identity while reaffirming the hierarchy which puts the male spectator on top.

II

In late nineteenth-century America, the feminized Hamlet was pathetic—fearful, jealous, sexually repressed. What would she look like under different cultural conditions, to other subjectivities, feminine as well as masculine? I can give one reasonably factual answer to the question. In 1920, Vining's *The Mystery of Hamlet* (mixed up with bits of Saxo and Believerest) provided the scenario for a silent film, made in Germany, directed by a Dane, Svend Gade, and starring the most famous European actress of the time, Gade's Danish wife, Asta Nielsen (1883-1972). One approaches Vining's text with a mixture of humour and curiosity, as a kind of critical freak. Asta Nielsen's *Hamlet*, by contrast, abashes condescension: however inauspicious its origins in Vining's 'theory', however strange the very idea of a *silent* Hamlet (of whatever gender), Nielsen's is a powerful performance in one of the great productions of Weimar cinema. Watching the Nielsen-Gade *Hamlet* in 1991, it is still possible to agree with the reviewer who wrote seventy years ago in *The New York Times*, 'It does not need to apologize to any production that has come from a foreign or domestic studio since the invention of motion pictures. It holds a secure place in the class with the best.'

There is a long tradition of actresses playing Hamlet, to which Nielsen, however unique her posture, belongs; it stretches from Sarah Siddons in 1775 to (at least) Diane Venora for The New York Shakespeare Festival in 1983. Bernard Grebanier's *Then Came Each Actor* gives a reasonably thorough survey of the tradition, although its condescending tone is as revealing as its hodge-podge of information. Grebanier thinks that the inexplicable obsession which has driven some women to assume men's roles may be connected to the belief that Hamlet is 'a kind of milk-sop too sensitive to act', a misconception which may have 'encouraged the dears to think of him, quite incorrectly, as a sister under the skin' (253). Since his chapter about women playing Hamlet deals with Shakespearean curiosas it is (he says) 'as fitting a place as any, without any insult intended to the ladies, to append [a description of the *Dog Hamlet*] given in the early nineteenth century, when well-trained dogs were much in demand upon the "boards" (263). Grebanier's academic version of good-old-boyishness, with its updated comparison of walking dogs and preaching women, is excessive enough to suggest that the phenomenon of female Hamlets—women usurping the central role in our central drama of patriarchy—causes him a degree of anxiety. To tactics such as his, 'the dears' might reply that acting well is the best revenge.

The actress who played Hamlet 'for the fourhundred-andeighth time last night in Dublin' (as Stephen hears in *Ulysses*) was Mrs Bandmann-Palmer, the longestplaying (408 was less than half her total) of several *fin de siècle* female Hamlets. Sarah Bernhardt's was the most famous. Bernhardt had played travesty roles in her youth; now, in middle age, she drew on the stage's transvestite tradition to provide her with starring roles in what she called her 'three *Hamlets*': Rostand's *L'Aiglon*, Musset's *Lorenzaccio*, and the thing itself. Her justification was that 'These roles portray youths of twenty or twenty-one, with the minds of men of forty.' When an actor has experience enough to play such parts, he no longer looks the part; but an actress of forty (or maybe fifty-five) has in every sense the appropriate stature. Bernhardt's age is relevant: although the heyday in the blood is not necessarily tame in one's fifties, there was little of the risqué in Bernhardt's potentially transgressive casting. Admirers of her five-hour production, in Paris in May 1899 and a month later in London, praised her suppression of 'the feminine element': 'If it were not for the high pitch of the voice and its occasional thinness, you would never imagine that this Hamlet was a woman. And even this slight reminder of the fact disappears after the first few minutes, when you get accustomed to it... In no other respect could I discover the slightest trace of the woman... Others were not so impressed. Max Beerbohm, in the *Saturday Review*, took a leaf from Vining's book to agree that Hamlet, in the complexity of his nature, had traces of femininity. Gentleness and a lack of executive ability are female qualities... But Shakespeare's
Hamlet was no woman, and Bernhardt's Hamlet was no man: 'The only compliment one can conscientiously pay her is that her Hamlet was, from first to last, très grande dame.'

With Asta Nielsen's performance it would be otherwise. Her screen persona was already indelibly inscribed with the sexually transgressive. During the War her image had served as pin-up on both sides of the line. Guillaume Apollinaire's ecstatic description, which unintentionally calls to mind Pater's description of the Mona Lisa, catches her sexually protean quality: 'She is all! She is the vision of the drinker and the dream of the lonely man. She laughs like a girl completely happy, and her eye knows of things so tender and shy that one could not speak of them.' The spice of androgyny helped make Nielsen this perfect Weimar icon. Even before the War she had appeared in transvestite roles: a photo in her autobiography, _Den Tiende Muse_, shows her in masculine evening dress in the Danish film _Ungdom og Galskab_ (Youth and Madness), from 1912-13; in 1916 there was _Das Liebes ABC (The Alphabet of Love)_ in which disguised as a young man, [she] takes a male friend through the night clubs and dives of a metropolis to introduce him to the facts of life. When her roles were not explicitly androgynous, they still tended toward the sexually ambiguous or transgressive: _Miss Julie_ (1921), _Mary Magdalen in I.N.R.I._ (1923), _Lulu in Wedekind's Erdgeist_ (1923), _Hedda Gabler_ (1924). Her Hamlet, a woman but no lady, belongs in this gallery.

I suspect that Nielsen and Gade discovered Vining's book through the reference to it in Ernest Jones's _Das Problem des Hamlet und der Oedipus-Komplex_ [1911], the original version of the book published in 1949 as _Hamlet and Oedipus_. Why they decided to use it is the more interesting question. Possibly they were attracted to _Hamlet_ as a kind of political joke: Germany's greatest post-war film star, a Dane, plays the greatest English tragic hero, a Dane. Also, Nielsen was attempting to establish herself as an actress of "art" roles—and what could be more art than _Hamlet_? She could become the Bernhardt of motion pictures by doing _Hamlet_, but she could not do it à la Bernhardt, who was drawing on a long stage tradition of transvestite performance. Cinema conventions, by contrast, tend to enforce a continuity, and in the case of stars like Nielsen a virtual identity, between performer and role. So the actress playing _Hamlet_ on film could not, like Bernhardt, try to erase her sex. She could, however, make the suppression of her sexuality part of the diegesis; she could make _Hamlet_ the story of an actress playing _Hamlet_ disguised as a man. It was the story Vining had already written, but significantly revised for a German audience of the 1920s.

Vining's female Hamlet had been a male fantasy, clearly addressed to other men; Nielsen's, by contrast, was addressed both to women and men, but with the possibility of different readings. According to Patrice Petro (to whose recent study _Joyless Streets: Women and Melodramatic Representation in Weimar Germany_ I am indebted), Nielsen was 'from the start [an] indisputable [favorite] with female audiences'; her presence 'ensured that a film would appeal to the female audience.' That appeal was implicit in the Nielsen screen persona, with its combination of independence and vulnerability, its powerful but often repressed and exploited sexuality. Her two most famous roles in contemporary social dramas were as prostitutes—Auguste in _Die freudlose Gasse (Joyless Streets, 1925)_ , and Maria in _Dirnentragödie (Tragedy of the Whore, 1927)_ ; both roles are marked by the pathos of a woman's sexual and economic exploitation. In Nielsen's polymorphous sexuality a viewer could read the strong image of a conceivable freedom from gender restrictions, crossed with the pathos of that freedom's bafflement by actual social conditions.

Weimar Germany's famous gender crisis—the world's most glamorous such crisis, thanks to Kander and Ebb's _Cabaret_—was visible in contemporary magazine articles decrying _die Vermännlichung der Frau_ (the masculinization of women). Patrice Petro in _Joyless Streets_ compares the iconography of these illustrated magazines to the iconography of Weimar cinema. 'Nun Aber Genug!' ('Enough already!') says the headline to an article from the _Berliner Illustrirte Zeitung_ from 1925: the page shows two photographic portrait busts, a man and a woman, both with short cropped hair, tie and jacket; the drawing below shows them in matching unisex dressing gown and pyjamas. From _Die Dame_ of 1926 there is a fashion article, _Variationen über den Smoking_ , with a cartoon of a shocked waiter and an amused hotel pageboy looking at an identically dressed pair of swells—except that her evening suit has skirt instead of trousers.
Petro's discussion of the German New Woman-inman's-clothing draws on Atina Grossman's study of the Sex Reform movement. Grossman characterizes the New Woman as a much abused and conflated image of flapper, young stenotypist, and working mother: her appropriation of masculine roles and prerogatives threatened not only the conservative demand for traditional gender distinctions but the radical demands of the Sex Reform movement as well. The movement's aim was to 'redomesticate' the New Woman as the answer to a host of perceived social problems ('the decline in the birthrate, the high incidence of abortions, the rise in the marriage age, and the increasing number of married women and mothers in the waged labor force') [157].

Central to its aims was a cure for female sexual frigidity by the promotion of mutual orgasm: through happier sexuality it would recuperate the liberated, or masculinized, woman for the patriarchal family. Asta Nielsen would have been a hard case for the sex reformers. Though she could be almost all things to all people she was not the image of a procreative, sexually satisfied hausfrau. Grossman describes the iconography that identifies the new deviants of the Sex Reform movement—women, that is, 'unfit for marriage': short, dark hair; dressed in a unisex shift; distinctly unmaternal—the image not only of the prostitute but of the Jewess and the lesbian (167). It is also in its details the image of Asta Nielsen's Hamlet, a new deviant in an ancient setting.

But the description leaves out the most important Nielsen feature: the eyes, the immensely blazing eyes that dominate Nielsen's pale, startlingly luminous face and have power to control the entire screen. Petro contrasts Nielsen's intense, dramatically focused gaze to the unfocused, almost mirrorlike gaze of screen actresses in the next generation in Germany and Hollywood: 'Nielsen ... belong[s] to a period of filmmaking when a focused and highly motivated female gaze was imbued with a pathos so intense that [her] performances became emblematic of an era, and a premonition of things to come' (160). In Hamlet, we first see those weirdly illuminated, searching eyes at work after some awkward opening sequences—battle, king's wounding, queen's delivery, false report of baby's sex, Hamlet's early childhood—that promise the spectator little beyond a superior laugh. Then the mise-en-scène becomes a classroom at the University of Wittenberg. First day of term, and all the high-spirited guys are in attendance—Laertes, Fortinbras, Horatio, Hamlet. Horatio has shoulder-length wavy blond hair—a more conventionally female style than Hamlet's short black hair with fringe brushed to one side over her forehead. They are seated side by side; Hamlet's books drop; Hamlet and Horatio both stoop, bang heads, recover—and Hamlet gazes with frank desire at the unwitting Horatio.

Of course there's nothing like it in Shakespeare, not only because Shakespeare never wrote the scene but because the gaze belongs both to male and female, both to Shakespeare's Hamlet and his Ophelia; it is encoded with the active intensity of the one character and the thwarted yearning of the other. The female Hamlet's gaze, here and elsewhere in the film, is overdetermined also in terms of audience identification. Hamlet's gaze holds and directs the audience's; we share her visual desire. Here, Hamlet solicits the audience's eroticizing scrutiny of Horatio as, elsewhere, she will of Ophelia. At the same time, however, and precisely because of the way the camera records the commanding intensity of her gaze, Hamlet him/herself is the object of the audience's erotic interest: the visually less exciting Horatio is no match for her; his blank surface intensifies her gaze, as a mirror does sunlight, and reflects its erotic charge back on her. The female Hamlet allows an unusual division of labour between the camera, which peruses Hamlet, and Hamlet in the diegesis, who is the active looker, simultaneously the object and director of the look.

The complexity of the viewing situation appears in a subsequent Wittenberg scene where Hamlet meets Laertes, his noisy, boorish upstairs neighbour in the dorm. A group of flirtatious girls has gathered beneath their windows. The feckless Laertes borrows money from Hamlet and invites Hamlet to join him downstairs with the girls. Hamlet refuses; and in close-up the camera watches Hamlet's eyes, gazing now not at the scene outside but into a distance over the audience's shoulder, a space for her impossible longing. The object of her fantasy is neither Laertes nor the girls, but by the same token the fantasy is marked, by her costume and gaze, as potentially polymorphous. Her look designates her both as desiring and desirable, whether viewed with a male or a female subjectivity. As normatively male subject, the spectator is indulged in a voyeuristic fantasy: a woman, unaware of his presence, exposes herself as sexual being to his controlling gaze. Nielsen's masquerade of masculinity—her unisex black tunic over black hose—works not to disguise her sexuality but
to invite the intrusive look; it tantalizes with what it pretends to hide. Male anxiety about masculine women is defused, and indeed converted to erotic energy, because the costume is a source of vulnerability—the audience is invited to see through the costume, sometimes by a literal slipping at the cleavage—rather than of strength. As normatively female subject, the spectator has the pleasure of identifying with a frankly desiring woman, one whose transgressive mobility is figured both in sexual and economic terms (she moves among the men as a first among equals); simultaneously, anxiety over the usurpation of male prerogatives is defused as Hamlet's male pose becomes a source of pathos, the sign of her/ his inability to join either Laertes or the girls outside—becomes, indeed, its own punishment.

Throughout, the film keeps a balance between empowering and disabling its masculinized heroine. The female Hamlet in Weimar, unlike the female Hamlet in late nineteenth-century America, is a lively, inventive, controlling presence. The script revises Vining (and Shakespeare) by removing the Ghost: this Hamlet will not be upscreened by any protoplasmic patriarch. After his offscreen death, old Hamlet is present only metonymically in the form of his own tomb, at which Hamlet grieves with long, almost erotic intensity, her arms virtually embracing the stone sarcophagus. Most visibly, the qualities of liveliness, inventiveness, and control can be read in Nielsen's lithe body and expressive face. Unlike a later film Hamlet—Olivier's, to which I will shortly turn—Nielsen seldom hides her gaze either from the other characters or from the viewing audience: the eyes are alert, searching; they invite us to join her in actively exploring those ignorant others—the rest of the cast of characters—whose less purposive looks make them all, in effect, characters within a narrative of her controlling. Mary Ann Doane says in the course of her attempt to theorize the female spectator, that 'There is always a certain excessiveness, a difficulty associated with women who appropriate the gaze, who insist upon looking'. Nielsen's female Hamlet, perusing Horatio with as much intensity as she does Ophelia and acting the detective role more fully than Shakespeare's Hamlet, is (in Doane's phrase) 'the site of an excessive and dangerous desire'.

The one character who knows Hamlet's secret, her mother Gertrude, is seldom allowed very close visual contact with Hamlet. The one character she would like to have know her secret, Horatio, is too dim and, later, too infatuated with Ophelia to know that there's a secret to be found out. Feigning madness, Hamlet is examined, at Polonius' direction, by a comically inept doctor. The doctor feels Hamlet's head, then puts his ear to her chest, but recognizes nothing: the scene, absurd as it is, increases the spectator's sense of privileged participation in the erotically charged secret of Hamlet's sex. Borrowing and revising a trick from Shakespearian comedy, the actress playing a young man woos another woman, Ophelia (both because Hamlet wants to hoist Polonius with his own petard and because she wants to alienate Ophelia's affections from Horatio). The scene, with Hamlet nibbling Ophelia's fingers, is played for laughs at Ophelia's expense, but the laughs do not obscure the transgressive eroticism. Making love to Ophelia, gazing at Horatio, soliciting the gaze both of men and women in her offscreen audience, Nielsen's Hamlet makes figurative androgyny into actual bisexuality, and realizes a possibility only deeply latent either in Shakespeare's play or Vining's 'theory'.

Nielsen's Hamlet, then, is a fuller appropriation, even subversion, than Vining's. Up to a point, she is a figure of woman transcending woman's social role. Simultaneously, however, she is also a cautionary figure of the lonely fate presumably awaiting the masculinized woman; her bisexuality is a source of pathos and circumscription. The woman playing a man making love to a woman is allowed that scope only on the terms that she is really pining for a man. Unfulfilment with either man or woman is the cost of her bisexuality. For all its bold—its characteristically Weimar—polymorphous indulgence, the Nielsen Hamlet still works to gratify male heterosexual fantasy. Its infamous final scene shows Horatio cradling his dead friend Hamlet in his arms. Horatio strokes Hamlet, beginning at the head; his hand reaches Hamlet's chest; and in the greatest scene of anagnorisis Shakespeare never wrote, the mystery of Hamlet is solved by a man's discovery of a woman's anatomical secret. But in Freud's Germany as in Shakespeare's England, the discovery of sexual difference may also be man's threat, the sign of a possible loss or reversion he dreads. Horatio peruses Hamlet as in the more familiar version Hamlet did Ophelia, with 'a sigh so piteous and profound / That it did seem to shatter all his bulk / And end his being'(2.1.95-7).
Nielsen's silent, female, German-Danish *Hamlet*, for all its many virtues, stands out as an oddity even in the strange history of *Hamlet* productions. As a coda to it and a brief conclusion, I want to turn to a more central document, the film of *Hamlet* made in 1948 with Laurence Olivier as director and star. I can't claim that Olivier was directly influenced by Nielsen's film, but he probably knew of it. He knew about Ernest Jones's Oedipal theory; and Jones knew about Vining; and the makers of the Weimar *Hamlet* seem to have known about Vining via Jones. But even without that web of relations, Olivier's film is implicated, as Nielsen's is, in the question posed by Jacqueline Rose, How far has the woman been at the centre of *Hamlet*?

Let me begin with a scene—it is 2.1 in the printed text—which intricately involves questions of spectatorship and gender. On the Shakespearian page it begins with Polonius instructing Reynaldo to dangle a'bait of falsehood'to catch the'carp of truth'(61) and continues with Ophelia's account of Hamlet's appearance in her closet,'with a look so piteous in purport / As if he had been loosèd out of hell / To speak of horrors'(83-5). This is our first representation of Hamlet since he declared his intention'To put an antic disposition on'(1.5.173). The whole scene comes in such a questionable shape that it may stand as the play's quintessentially indeterminate scene. Is Ophelia honest, or is she an unreliable narrator? The Hamlet she describes is a clinical picture of melancholic distraction: is it real or feigned? If real, why? Is it'the very ecstasy of love'? Or grief for a father murdered and a mother whored? If feigned, for whose benefit? Ophelia's? Or is she the bait to take a bigger fish?

But everyone knows the options. I want to ask a different kind of question: Who in this scene is the observer, who observed? We *hear* that Hamlet took Ophelia by the wrist, went to arm's length, and fell to such perusal of her face as if he would draw it; then he gazed at her until he found his way out of doors without the help of eyes, and to the last bent their light on Ophelia. On stage we *see* Ophelia being looked at by Polonius with the intensity of a jealous father and a suspicious state counsellor. In her narration Ophelia is the object of Hamlet's gaze, and in the present scene the object of Polonius': she is ringed round by the looks, not only piteous in purport, of men. As such, she may, at this complex moment of on-and off-stage viewing,'be said to connote *to-belooked-at-ness*', to borrow Laura Mulvey's controversial, influential, and now much-modified description of the conventional role of women in classic cinema. Yet many *readers* of the play—and I suspect many viewers in their retrospective experience of the play—will have at least as vivid an image of Hamlet as they do of Ophelia. On stage, too, Polonius' intense regard of Ophelia is motivated by his desire to see Hamlet through her narration. In this scene of specular interrogation, Hamlet, gazing on the enigma of Woman (for in Ophelia he sees superimposed the image of Gertrude too, both of them named Frailty) becomes himself the enigma for Polonius's speculation. With his clothes and wits in disarray, an ambiguous document for others to read, Hamlet plays a part similar to the one Ophelia will play in her own madness. Turning his gaze silently, mysteriously, dangerously on Ophelia, Hamlet directs everyone else's gaze at himself, becoming the elusive object of their desire for controlling knowledge. Hamlet's delay—his failure to drop the other shoe after the one he drops in 2.1—manifests itself as a passive-aggressive tease, a threatening allure. God has given him one face and he makes himself another; and now the court must regard him with the kind of anxious regard he gives to Ophelia and Gertrude.

Olivier's filmed version literally puts Hamlet in visual place of Ophelia by flattening, in effect, the distance between on-stage narration and off-stage action. The sequence opens on a close-up of Jean Simmons'Ophelia, with her voice-over recounting the scene with Hamlet that we now see mimed in visual present tense; there is no Polonius to look at Ophelia as she narrates the incident. An iris shot focuses our attention on Ophelia's eyes, and then (as the scene opens out again) Hamlet enters her room with his look so piteous in purport. For a few moments the camera looks equally at Hamlet and Ophelia in close mid-shot; but when Hamlet falls to perusal of Ophelia's face, Simmons turns her back to the offscreen spectator and her look directs ours to Hamlet.
Olivier's directorial choice to make Hamlet rather than Ophelia the object of the audience's gaze involves more than the cinematographic prejudice against a talking head. It's true that throughout the production Olivier tried to avoid static shots of long speeches. Deep focus photography and voice-overs give Hamlet mobility during soliloquies. Shooting continuously, without cuts, while the voice comes either from the speaker directly or disembodied from an unlocalized space of psychic authority, this camera can record a moving speaker even where Shakespeare's text requires only a speaking speaker. According to Olivier's cameraman Desmond Dickinson, deep focus achieved 'extremely natural and realistic photography, with perfect focusing and no distortion'. But in cinema, 'natural' and 'realistic' are conventional values; they are, conventionally, achieved precisely with the montage that Olivier's cinematography avoids. In fact, for most viewers, Olivier's mise en scène, with its nearly expressionistic settings recorded in deep focus by a travelling camera, will appear the very opposite of 'natural' or 'realistic'. The effect of Olivier's restless camera, with its swooping gaze going up and down stairs and in and out of archways and rooms, is to keep the viewer insistently aware of the camera's presence. The classic Hollywood cinema tends to efface the camera through cutting and editing, and gives the spectator the pleasure of seeming to control the scene; Olivier's camera, by contrast, is a virtual actor, the uneffaced controller of our gaze. It is moreover a gendered camera, a distinctively male actor, watching (in 2.1 and elsewhere) a Hamlet/Olivier cinematically coded (again, in 2.1 and elsewhere) for a conventionally female 'to-be-looked-at-ness'. The camera's gender is the effect of its intrusiveness, its habit of penetrating into spaces, often arched or colonnaded, that it reciprocally inscribes as female. The famous visual bridge from battlement to court (1.1 to 1.2) makes the point early on, as the camera travels down the tunnel-like stairs, pauses to observe a book on a chair, tracks to one of the archways that will metonymically figure Ophelia, and finally (with the climax of William Walton's music) enters the Queen's bedroom to reveal the labial curtains of its enormous bed. No interior space can exclude this camera, not even the interior space of the body. Here it relies on metonymy to investigate the genitalia of Ophelia and Gertrude. In the case of Hamlet himself, the camera's curiosity is upwardly displaced: during the 'To be or not to be' soliloquy, it bores through the back of Hamlet's head, exposing (for one brief bizarre moment) the organic brain beneath the skull. The brain is the conventionally masculine site for Hamlet's interiority; in other ways, however, and in other scenes, the camera turns its gaze on Hamlet with feminizing penetration.

Reviewing the film in 1948, The New York Times characterized Olivier's Hamlet as 'a solid and virile young man'; my purpose is not to 'out' this manly man, but to suggest that Olivier's performance continues the Romantic tendency toward a feminized Hamlet. Indeed there are ways in which Olivier's Hamlet, more than Nielsen's, culminates the oak tree-in-acostly-vase tradition, of which Vining's The Mystery of Hamlet is a slightly irregular offshoot. Olivier has claimed that he originally wanted only to direct, not star in, his production because he felt himself better suited to 'stronger character roles' than to the lyrical, poetical role of Hamlet. To fit himself to that role, and (he says) to avoid the possibility of Hamlet later being identified with me' (15), he dyed his hair the bright blond colour that contrasts so sharply with Nielsen's dark Hamlet, and which in Hollywood films of the 1940s is the studio starlet's colour-of-choice. And by comparison with Nielsen's Hamlet, with her unabashed gaze, Olivier's Hamlet is languidly passive, an object to be seen by the aggressive camera. He is shown to us first during the court scene of 1.2: Claudius has dispatched the business of marriage and funeral, and dealt with Laertes' request to go to Paris, when the camera finally reveals Hamlet slumped despondently in his chair. His first two enigmatic lines (A little more than kin and less than kind,' Not so, my lord, I am too much I'th'sun') are cut, so that Claudius and Gertrude address a silent, apparently passive figure with downcast eyes. This is the Hamlet who carries 'the stamp of one defect', that 'vicious mole of nature' to which Olivier's voice-over in the opening sequence gives a name: 'a man who could not make up his mind'. Between that diagnosis of Hamlet's dram of indecisiveness and the Freud-Jones diagnosis of unresolved Oedipal conflict there is considerable slippage: Olivier has said that he was impressed with Jones's analysis of Hamlet's problem, but in the movie it has been generalized to 'such a kind of gaingiving as would perhaps trouble a woman' (5.2.161-2). Fear of death, Vining said, is an 'essentially feminine trait'; and the inability to make up one's mind (he might as well have said) is another.
But of course we no longer believe in, or at least we're suspicious of, 'essential' anythings. In the 1989-90 season, The Mabou Mines company directed by Lee Breuer presented its play Lear, sans King, with all the roles gender-reversed. Race, ethnicity, and class were similarly submitted to experimental deconstruction: the scene was the American deep South, Lear's castle a sort of God's Little Acre shack, and the heath a ruined miniature golf course. In the cultural context of such a production it seems worthwhile to call attention to earlier experiments in cross-gendering Shakespeare, from Vining through Nielsen to Olivier. One might speculate (elsewhere) why King Lear is currently of more interest than Hamlet to critics and performers concerned with questioning traditional gender constructions. Man, Hamlet says, delights not him; and (because Rosencrantz and Guildenstern smirk at the innuendo they hear) he adds, 'nor woman neither' (2.2.310): the three versions of Hamlet I've looked at suggest that his displeasure with the conventional distribution of gender roles has been widely felt, if sometimes strangely manifested, but that even in the mimic world of theatre the attempt to dismantle rigid distinctions between masculine and feminine records mainly the fear that gives life to the hope. Horatio's sweet prince, gazed at by man and woman as, delighting in neither, he gazes at both, remains a sign of that melancholy fact.

Notes


8 Characters of Shakespeare's Plays, in The Complete Works of William Hazlitt, ed. P. P. Howe (London, 1930), vol. 4, p. 237. Hazlitt objects to the acting of the part both by Kemble and Kean: the one 'plays it like a man in armour, with a determined inveteracy of purpose, in one undeviating straight line', the other is full of 'sharp angles and abrupt starts . . . too strong and pointed'; neither catches Hamlet as he is, 'full of weakness and melancholy', a character of 'natural grace and refined susceptibility'.

Susan J. Wolfson's essay 'Feminizing Keats' (in Critical Essays on John Keats, ed. Hermione de Almeida [Boston, 1990], pp. 317-56) provides a fascinating account of the ambiguous ways in which the language of femininity was attached to another Romantic figure. Her discussion of Keats amplifies by implication some of the brief suggestions I am making here about Hamlet's image in Romantic iconography.


Weeks, pp. 53-4.


In her autobiography *Den Tiende Muse* (Copenhagen, 1946), vol. 2, p. 145, Nielsen says that she formed her own company,'Art Film', to produce *Hamlet* in 1920. The American version (a print is in the Film Library at the Museum of Modern Art, New York) calls itself an'Asta Films'production, and is dated 1921. Direction and Design, Svend Gade; Scenario, Erwin Gephard; Photography, Kurt Courant and Axel Graatkjer; with Eduard von Winterstein as Claudius, Helena Makowska as Gertrude. An opening card says that the film is based on ancient legend and on'the contention of the eminent American Shakespearean scholar, Edward P. Vining (Hon. M.A. Yale)'.

*N.Y. Times*, 9 November 1921. The critic in *Variety* (11 November 1921) was less impressed,'Miss Nielsen's abilities are exceptional, but they are not the type to enrapture the American public. Almost emaciated, she has command and distinction of movement. Her facial pantomime is of considerable range, but dead whites and blacks have to be used to overcome her physical deficiencies.'(Her what?) There is a sympathetic discussion of the film in Robert Hamilton Ball, *Shakespeare on Silent Film* (London, 1968), pp. 272-8. Robert A. Duffy discusses Gade's cinematography but not Nielsen's performance in'Gade, Olivier, Richardson: Visual Strategy in *Hamlet* Adaptations', *Literature/Film Quarterly* 4 (1976), pp. 141-52. See also Bernice Kliman,'*Hamlet*: Film, Television, and Audio Performance (Rutherford, N.J., 1988).

Diane Venora is unique in having gone, as she matured, from playing Hamlet to playing Ophelia (again at Joseph Papp's New York Shakespeare Festival, in the 1990 production starring and directed by Kevin Kline). According to Frank Rich in *The New York Times* (2 December 1982), Venora's Hamlet resembled Bernhardt's in that'we are simply asked to forget that a woman (and a beautiful one) happens to be playing a prince'.


Theodore Stanton,'Sara Bernhardt as Hamlet', *The Critic* 35 (1899), p. 638. Thanks to Professor Deborah Barker for bringing this review to my attention.


24 Luft, p. 21.

25 Nielsen here played the role more famously associated with Louise Brooks, who played it in G. W. Pabst's *Lulu* (1928).

26 *Das Problem des Hamlet und der Oedipus-Komplex* (Leipzig, 1911; rpt. New York, 1970), in which Vining's theory is described on p. 5 and in a footnote on p. 39.


31 'Film and the Masquerade: Theorizing the Female Spectator', *Screen*, 23 (1982), 74-87; p. 83.

32 Doane, 84. On Hamlet as detective: instead of a Ghost to give away the game, this female Hamlet must herself explore the cistern in the castle dungeon where Claudius keeps the writhing snakes with which, in this version, he killed old Hamlet.

33 Professor Susan Wolfson reminds me that at this moment in Nielsen's *Hamlet* a German audience would recall Siegfried's discovery of Brunhilde's sex when he takes off her armour.


36 Dale Silviria, *Laurence Olivier and the Art of Film-making* (Rutherford, New Jersey, 1985), pp. 24-5, says that Olivier's photography violates the psychological realism of classic Hollywood film editing . . . the self-conscious quality of the traveling camera emphasizes . . . the viewer's act of observation. It emphasizes the viewer's role as witness.'

In his contribution to Cross, p. 15.

Mabou Mines's Lear, adapted and directed by Lee Breuer, at The Triplex Theater (New York), 9 January-11 February 1990, with Ruth Maleczech as Lear.

I would like to thank Mary Ann Jensen, curator of the Theatre Collection, Princeton University Library, for her help in locating material and even translating from the Danish.

Hamlet (Vol. 44): Hamlet And His Dilemma

Arthur Kirsch (essay date 1981)


[In the following essay, originally published in 1981, Kirsch argues that the source of Hamlet's anxiety is not repressed fantasy; rather, it is situated within the reality of the play's events. Kirsch also reviews Freud's distinction between melancholy and mourning, and examines Hamlet's experience with grief]

Hamlet is a revenge play, and judging by the number of performances, parodies, and editions of The Spanish Tragedy alone, the genre enjoyed an extraordinary popularity on the Elizabethan stage. Part of the reason for that popularity is the theatrical power of the revenge motif itself. The quest for vengeance satisfies an audience's most primitive wishes for intrigue and violence. "The Tragic Auditory," as Charles Lamb once remarked, "wants blood,"¹ and the revenge motif satisfies it in abundance. Equally important, it gives significant shape to the plot and sustained energy to the action, whatever moral calculus one may use in judging the ethos of revenge itself.² But if vengeance composes the plot of the revenge play, grief composes its essential emotional content, its substance. In Marlowe's Jew of Malta, when Ferneze finds the body of his son killed in a duel, he cries out in his loss that he wishes his son had been murdered so that he could avenge his death.³ It is a casual line, but it suggests a deep connection between anger and sorrow in the revenge-play genre itself that both Kyd and Shakespeare draw upon profoundly. At the end of The Spanish Tragedy the ghost of Andrea says, "Ay, now my hopes have end in their effects, / When blood and sorrow finish my desires" (4.5.1-2),⁴ and it was unquestionably Kyd's brilliance in representing the elemental power of sorrow, as well as of blood, that enabled the revenge genre to establish so large a claim on the Elizabethan theatrical imagination. The speeches in which Hieronimo gives voice to his grief, including the famous "Oh eyes, no eyes, but fountains fraught with tears; / Oh life, no life, but lively form of death" (3.2.1-2) were parodied for decades after their first performance, so great was their impact, and the moving figure of an old man maddened with grief over the loss of his son was a major part of Shakespeare's theatrical inheritance.

In Shakespeare's play it is Hamlet himself who talks explicitly of sorrow and blood, relating them directly to the ghost as well as to each other in the scene in his mother's bedchamber in which the ghost appears for the last time. "Look you," he tells his mother, who characteristically cannot see the ghost.

how pale he glares.
His form and cause conjoined, preaching to stones,
Would make them capable. (To the Ghost) Do not look upon me,
Lest with this piteous action you convert
My stern effects. Then what I have to do
Will want true colour—tears perchance for blood.

(3.4.116-21)
These lines suggest synapses between grief and vengeance that can help make the whole relation between the plot and emotional content of *Hamlet* more intelligible, and that particularly can help answer the charge made by many distinguished critics that Hamlet's emotions seem in excess of any objective cause as well as of the plot. T.S. Eliot's remark, for example, that Hamlet's mother is not an adequate equivalent for his disgust with her, that no possible action can satisfy this disgust, and that therefore "nothing that Shakespeare can do with the plot can express Hamlet for him" are at least susceptible to an answer if we take seriously Hamlet's own focus upon the experience of grief and upon its profound interaction with his task of revenge.5

The note of grief is sounded by Hamlet in his first words in the play, before he ever sees the ghost, in his opening dialogue with the King and his mother. The Queen says to him:

> Good Hamlet, cast thy nightly colour off,  
> And let thine eye look like a friend on Denmark.  
> Do not for ever with thy vailed lids  
> Seek for thy noble father in the dust.  
> Thou know'st'tis common—all that lives must die,  
> Passing through nature to eternity.  

(1.2.68-73)

Hamlet answers, "Ay, madam, it is common." "If it be / Why seems it so particular with thee?" she asks; and he responds,

> Seems, madam? Nay, it is. I know not "seems."  
> 'Tis not alone my inky cloak, good-mother.  
> Nor customary suits of solemn black,  
> Nor windy suspiration of forced breath,  
> No, nor the fruitful river in the eye,  
> Nor the dejected haviour of the visage,  
> Together with all forms, moods, shows of grief,  
> That can denote me truly. These indeed "seem,"  
> For they are actions that a man might play;  
> But I have that within which passeth show—  
> These but the trappings and the suits of woe.  

(1.2.74-86)

Though Hamlet's use of the conventional Elizabethan forms of mourning expresses his hostility to an unfeeling court, he is at the same time speaking deeply of an experience that everyone who has lost someone close to him must recognize. He is speaking of the early stages of grief, of its shock, of its inner and still hidden sense of loss, and trying to describe what is not fully describable—the literally inexpressible wound whose immediate consequence is the dislocation, if not transvaluation, of our customary perceptions and feelings and attachments to life. The loss of someone we love creates, in Jacques Lacan's phrase, "a hole in the real,"6 and it is no accident that this speech sets in motion Hamlet's preoccupation with seeming and being, including the train of images of acting that is crystallized in the play within the play. The peculiar centripetal pull of anger and sorrow that the speech depicts remains as the central undercurrent of that preoccupation, most notably in Hamlet's later soliloquy about the player's imitation of Hecuba's grief:

> Is it not monstrous that this player here,  
> But in a fiction, in a dream of passion,  
> Could force his soul so to his own conceit
That from her working all his visage wanned,
Tears in his eyes, distraction in's aspect,
A broken voice, and his whole function suiting
With forms to his conceit? And all for nothing.
For Hecuba! What's Hecuba to him, or he to Hecuba,
That he should weep for her? What would he do
Had he the motive and the cue for passion
That I have?

(2.2.552-63)

Hamlet then goes on to rebuke himself for his own inaction, but the player's imitation of grief nonetheless moves him internally, as nothing else can, in fact to take action, as he conceives of the idea of staging a play to test both the ghost and the conscience of the King.

After Hamlet finishes answering his mother in the earlier court scene, the King offers his own consolation for Hamlet's grief:

'Tis sweet and commendable in your nature, Hamlet,
To give these mourning duties to your father;
But you must know your father lost a father;
That father lost, lost his; and the survivor bound
In filial obligation for some term
To do obsequious sorrow. But to persever
In obstinate condolement is a course
Of impious stubbornness,'tis unmanly grief,
It shows a will most incorrect to heaven,
A heart unfortified, a mind impatient,
An understanding simple and unschooled;
For what we know must be, and is as common
As any the most vulgar thing to sense,
Why should we in our peevish opposition
Take it to heart? Fie,'tis a fault to heaven,
A fault against the dead, a fault to nature,
To reason most absurd, whose common theme
Is death of fathers, and who still hath cried
From the first corpse till he that died today,
"This must be so."

(1.2.87-106)

There is in fact much in this consolation of philosophy which is spiritually sound, and to which every human being must eventually accommodate himself, but it comes at the wrong time, from the wrong person, and in its essential belittlement of the heartache of grief, it comes with the wrong inflection. It is a dispiriting irony of scholarship on this play that so many critics should essentially take such words, from such a king, as a text for their own indictments of Hamlet's behavior. What a person who is grieving needs, of course, is not the consolation of words, even words that are true, but sympathy—and this Hamlet does not receive, not from the court, not from his uncle, and more important, not from his own mother, to whom his grief over his father's death is alien and unwelcome.
After the King and Queen leave the stage, it is to his mother's lack of sympathy not only for him but for her dead husband that Hamlet turns in particular pain:

O that this too too solid flesh would melt,
Thaw, and resolve itself into a dew,
Or that the Everlasting had not fixed
His canon'gainst self-slaughter! O God, O God,
How weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable
Seem to me all the uses of this world!
Fie on't, ah fie! Tis an unweeded garden
That grows to seed; things rank and gross in nature
Possess it merely. That it should come to this—
But two months dead—nay, not so much, not two—
So excellent a king, that was to this
Hyperion to a satyr, so loving to my mother
That he might not beteem the winds of heaven
Visit her face too roughly! Heaven and earth,
Must I remember? Why, she would hang on him
As if increase of appetite had grown
By what it fed on, and yet within a month—
Let me not think on't; frailty, they name is woman—
A little month, or ere those shoes were old
With which she followed my poor father's body,
Like Niobe, all tears, why she, even she—
O God, a beast that wants discourse of reason
Would have mourned longer!—married with mine uncle,
My father's brother, but no more like my father
Than I to Hercules; within a month,
Ere yet the salt of most unrighteous tears
Had left the flushing of her gallèd eyes,
She married. O most wicked speed, to post
With such dexterity to incestuous sheets!
It is not, nor it cannot come to good.
But break, my heart, for I must hold my tongue.

(1.2.129-58)

This is an exceptionally suggestive speech and the first of many that seem to invite oedipal interpretations of the play. About these I do not propose to speak directly, except to remark that the source of Hamlet's so-called oedipal anxiety is real and present, it is not an archaic and repressed fantasy. Hamlet does perhaps protest too much, in this soliloquy and elsewhere, about his father's superiority to his uncle (and to himself), and throughout the play he is clearly preoccupied with his mother's sexual appetite; but these ambivalences and preoccupations, whatever their unconscious roots, are elicited by a situation, palpable and external to him, in which they are acted out. The oedipal configurations of Hamlet's predicament, in other words, inhabit the whole world of the play, they are not simply a function of his characterization, even though they resonate with it profoundly. There is every reason, in reality, for a son to be deeply troubled and discomposed by the appetite of a mother who betrays his father's memory by her incestuous marriage, within a month, to his brother, and murderer, and there is surely more than reason for a son to be obsessed for a time with a father who literally returns from the grave to haunt him. But in any case, I think that at least early in the play, if not also later, such oedipal echoes cannot be disentangled from Hamlet's grief, and Shakespeare's purpose in arousing them is not to call Hamlet's character to judgment, but to expand our understanding of the nature and
intensity of his suffering. For all these resonant events come upon Hamlet while he has still not even begun to assimilate the loss of a living father, while he is still mourning, seemingly alone in Denmark, for the death of a king, and their major psychic impact and importance, I think, is that they protract and vastly dilate the process of his grief.

Freud called this process the work of mourning and described it in his essay "Mourning and Melancholia" in a way that seems exceptionally germane to this play. Almost all of Freud's ideas can also be found in some form in the vast Renaissance literature on melancholy, but Freud's discussion perhaps best suggests the coherence they had in Shakespeare's imagination. The major preoccupation of the essay is, in fact, the pathology of melancholy, or what we would now more commonly call depression, but in the course of his discussion Freud finds unusually suggestive analogies and distinctions between mourning and melancholy. He points out, to begin with, that except in one respect the characteristics of normal grief and of pathological depression are the same, and that the two states can easily be confused—as they are, endemically, in interpretations of Hamlet's character. The characteristics of depression, Freud observes, are deep and painful dejection, a loss of interest in the outside world, an inability to act, and self-disgust as well as self-reproach. Except for the loss of faith in oneself, Freud continues, "the same traits are met with in grief: "Profound mourning, the reaction to the loss of a loved person, contains the same feeling of pain, loss of interest in the outside world—in so far as it does not recall the dead one—loss of capacity to adopt any new object of love, which would mean a replacing of the one mourned, the same turning from every active effort that is not connected with thoughts of the dead." Freud remarks that "though grief involves grave departures from the normal attitude of life, it never occurs to us to regard it as a morbid condition. We rest assured that after a lapse of time it will be overcome, and we look upon any interference with it as inadvisable or even harmful."

The process by which grief is overcome, the work of mourning, Freud describes as a struggle—the struggle between the instinctive human disposition to remain libidinally bound to the dead person and the necessity to acknowledge the clear reality of his loss. "The task," he writes, is "carried through bit by bit," at enormous expense of time and energy, "while all the time the existence of the lost object is continued in the mind." "Each single one of the memories and hopes which bound the libido to the object" must be "brought up" and relinquished. "Why this process" Freud adds, "of carrying out the behest of reality bit by bit, which is in the nature of a compromise, should be so extraordinarily painful is not at all easy to explain in terms of mental economics. It is worth noting that this pain seems natural to us."

Freud's wonderment at the pain of grief must seem odd to most of us, and it may be a function of his general unwillingness in most of his writing, including Beyond the Pleasure Principle, to deal directly with death itself. The issue is important because it is related to an astonishing lapse in the argument of "Mourning and Melancholia," which is critical to an understanding of Hamlet, and which might have helped Freud himself account for the extraordinary pain of grief in terms of his own conception of mental economics. For what Freud leaves out in his consideration of mourning is its normal but enormously disturbing component of protest and anger—initially anger at being wounded and abandoned, but fundamentally a protest, both conscious and unconscious, against the inescapably mortal condition of human life.

Freud finds such anger in depression, and with his analysis of that state few would wish to quarrel. The salient points of his argument are that in depression there is "an unconscious loss of a love-object, in contradistinction to mourning, in which there is nothing unconscious about the loss," and that there is a fall of self-esteem and a consistent cadence of self-reproach which is also not found in mourning. The key to an understanding of this condition, Freud continues, is the perception that the self-criticism of depression is really anger turned inwards, "that the self-reproaches are reproaches against a loved object which have been shifted onto the patient's own ego." The "complaints" of depressed people, he remarks, "are really plaitst in the legal sense of the word . . . everything derogatory that they say of themselves relates at bottom to someone else." All the actions of a depressed person, Freud concludes, "proceed from an attitude of revolt, a mental constellation which by a certain process has become transformed into melancholic contrition." Freud's
explanation of the dynamics of this process is involved and technical, but there are two major points that emerge clearly and are highly relevant to *Hamlet*. The first is that there is, in a depressed person, "an identification of the ego with the abandoned object." "The shadow of the object," he says, "falls upon the ego," so that the ego can "henceforth be criticized by a special mental faculty like an object, like the forsaken object. In this way the loss of the object becomes transformed into a loss in the ego." 14 The second point that Freud stresses is that because there is an ambivalent relation to the lost object to begin with, the regressive movement toward identification is also accompanied by a regressive movement toward sadism, a movement whose logical culmination is suicide, the killing in the self of the lost object with whom the depressed person has so thoroughly identified. Freud adds that in only one other situation in human life is the ego so overwhelmed by the object, and that is in the state of intense love.

With these analogies and distinctions in mind, let us now return to the opening scene at court. As has already been suggested, in his first speech to his mother, "Seems, madam? Nay, it is. I know not'seems," Hamlet speaks from the very heart of grief of the supervening reality of his loss and of its inward wound, and the accent of normal, if intense, grief remains dominant in his subsequent soliloquy as well. It is true that in that soliloquy his mind turns to thoughts of "self-slaughter," but those thoughts notwithstanding, the emphasis of the speech is not one of self-reproach. It is not himself, but the uses of the world that Hamlet finds "weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable," and his mother's frailty suggests a rankness and grossness in nature itself. The "plaints" against his mother that occupy the majority of his speech are conscious and both his anger and ambivalence toward her fully justified. Even on the face of it, her hasty remarriage makes a mockery of his father's memory that intensifies the real pain and loneliness of his loss; and if he also feels his own ego threatened, and if there is a deeper cadence of grief in his words, it is because he is already beginning to sense that the shadow of a crime with "the primal eldest curse upon't" (3.3.37) has fallen upon him, a crime that is not delusional and not his, and that eventually inflicts a punishment upon him that tries his spirit and destroys his life. The last lines of Hamlet's soliloquy are: "It is not, nor it cannot come to good. / But break, my heart, for I must hold my tongue." These lines show Hamlet's prescience, not his disease, and the instant he completes them Horatio, Marcellus, and Barnardo enter to tell him of the apparition of his dead father, the ghost that is haunting the kingdom and has been a part of our own consciousness from the very outset of the play.

Hamlet's subsequent meeting with the ghost of his father is both the structural and psychic nexus of the play. The scene is so familiar to us that the extraordinary nature of its impact on Hamlet can be overlooked, even in the theater. It begins with Hamlet expressing pity for the ghost and the ghost insisting that he attend to a more "serious" purpose:

> Ghost List, Hamlet, list,
> O list! If thou didst ever thy dear father love—
> *Hamlet* O God!
> *Ghost* Revenge his foul and most unnatural murder.

(1.5.22-25)

The ghost then confirms to Hamlet's prophetic soul that "The serpent that did sting they father's life / Now wears his crown," and he proceeds to describe both Gertrude's remarriage and his own murder in his orchard in terms that seem deliberately to evoke echoes of the serpent in the Garden of Eden. The ghost ends his recital saying,

> O, horrible, O horrible, most horrible!
> If thou has nature in thee, bear it not.
> Let not the royal bed of Denmark be
> A couch for luxury and damnèd incest.
But howsoever thou pursuest this act,
Taint not thy mind, nor let thy soul contrive
Against thy mother aught. Leave her to heaven,
And to those thorns that in her bosom lodge
To prick and sting her. Fare thee well at once.
The glow-worm shows the matin to be near,
And gins to pale his uneffectual fire.
Adieu, adieu, Hamlet. Remember me. Exit

(1.5.39-40, 80-91)

Hamlet's answering speech, as the ghost exits, is profound, and it predicates the state of his mind and feeling until the beginning of the last act of the play:

O all you host of heaven! O earth! What else?
And shall I couple hell? O fie! Hold, hold, my heart,
And you, my sinews, grow not instant old,
But bear me stiffly up. Remember thee?
Ay, thou poor ghost, while memory holds a seat
In this distracted globe. Remember thee?
Yea, from the table of my memory
I'll wipe away all trivial fond records,
All saws of books, all forms, all pressures past,
That youth and observation copied there,
And thy commandment all alone shall live
Within the book and volume of my brain
Unmixed with baser matter. Yes, yes, by heaven.
O most pernicious woman!
O villain, villain, smiling, damnèd villain!
My tables, My tables—meet it is I set it down
That one may smile and smile and be a villain!
At least I am sure it may be so in Denmark.
He writes
So, uncle, there you are. Now to my word:
It is "Adieu, adieu, remember me."
I have sworn't.

(1.5.92-114)

This is a crucial and dreadful vow for many reasons, but the most important, as Freud places us in a position to understand, is that the ghost's injunction to remember him, an injunction that Shakespeare's commitment to the whole force of the revenge genre never really permits either us or Hamlet to question, brutally intensifies Hamlet's mourning and makes him incorporate in its work what we would normally regard as the pathology of depression. For as we have seen, the essence of the work of mourning is the internal process by which the ego heals its wound, differentiates itself from the object, and slowly, bit by bit, cuts its libidinal ties with the one who has died. Yet this is precisely what the ghost forbids, and forbids, moreover, with a lack of sympathy for Hamlet's grief that is even more pronounced than the Queen's. He instead tells Hamlet that if ever he loved his father, he should remember him; he tells Hamlet of Gertrude's incestuous remarriage in a way that makes her desire, if not the libido itself, seem inseparable from murder and death; and finally he tells Hamlet to kill. Drawing upon and crystallizing the deepest energies of the revenge-play genre, the ghost thus enjoins Hamlet to identify with him in his sorrow and to give murderous purpose to his anger. He consciously compels in
Hamlet, in other words, the regressive movement toward identification and sadism that together usually constitute the unconscious dynamics of depression. It is only after this scene that Hamlet feels punished with what he later calls a "sore distraction" (5.2.176) and he begins to reproach himself for his own nature and to meditate on suicide. The ghost, moreover, not only compels this process in Hamlet, like much of the world of the play, he incarnates it. The effect of his appearance and behest to Hamlet is to literalize Hamlet's subsequent movement toward the realm of death which he inhabits, and away from all of the bonds that nourish life and make it desirable, away from "all trivial fond records, / All saws of books, all forms, all pressures past." As C.S. Lewis insisted long ago, the ghost leads Hamlet into a spiritual and psychic region that seems poised between the living and the dead. It is significant that Hamlet is subsequently described in images that suggest the ghost's countenance and significant too, as we shall see later, that Hamlet's own appearance and state of mind change, at the beginning of act 5, at the moment when it is possible to say that he has finally come to terms with the ghost and with his father's death and has completed the work of mourning.

Shakespeare intends us always to retain a sense of intensified mourning rather than of disease in Hamlet, partly because Hamlet is always conscious of the manic roles he plays and is always lucid with Horatio, but also because his thoughts and feelings turn outward as well as inward and his behavior is finally a symbiotic response to the actually diseased world of the play. And though that diseased world, poisoned at the root by a truly guilty king, eventually represents an overwhelming tangle of guilt, its main emphasis, both for Hamlet and for us, is the experience of grief. The essential focus of the action as well as the source of its consistent pulsations of feeling, the pulsations which continuously charge both Hamlet's sorrow and his anger (and in which the whole issue of delay is subsumed) is the actuality of conscious, not unconscious, loss. For in addition to the death of his father in this play, Hamlet suffers the loss amounting to death of all those persons, except Horatio, whom he has most loved and who have most animated and given meaning to his life. He loses his mother, he loses Ophelia, and he loses his friends; and we can have no question that these losses are real and inescapable.

The loss of his mother is the most intense and the hardest to discuss. One should perhaps leave her to heaven as the ghost says, but even he cannot follow that advice. Hamlet is genuinely betrayed by her, most directly by her lack of sympathy for him. She is clearly sexually drawn and loyal to her new husband, and she is said to live almost by Hamlet's looks, but she is nonetheless essentially inert, oblivious to the whole realm of experience through which her son travels. She seems not to care, and seems particularly not to care about his grief. Early in the play, when Claudius and others are in hectic search of the reason for Hamlet's melancholy, she says with bovine imperturbability, "I doubt it is no other but the main—/ His father's death and our o'er-hasty marriage" (2.2.56-57). That over-hasty and incestuous marriage, which, as Roland M. Frye has amply documented, would have been even more scandalous to Elizabethan sensibilities than it is to ours, creates a reservoir of literally grievous anger in Hamlet. It suggests to him the impermanence upon which the Player King later insists (3.2.185-92), and it also, less obviously, compels Hamlet to think of the violation of the union that gave him his own life and being. It is very difficult, under any circumstances, to think precisely upon our parents and their relationship without causing deep tremors in our selves, and for Hamlet the circumstances are extraordinary. In addition marriage has a sacramental meaning to him that has been largely lost in modern society. Like the ghost, Hamlet always speaks reverently of the sanctity of marriage vows, and the one occasion on which he mocks marriage is in fact an attack upon Claudius's presumption to have replaced his father. As he is leaving for England, Hamlet addresses Claudius and says, "Farewell, dear mother." Claudius says, "Thy loving father, Hamlet," and Hamlet answers, "My mother. Father and mother is man and wife, man and wife is one flesh, and so my mother" (4.3.51-54). Behind the scriptural image in this ferocious attack upon Claudius is both Hamlet's memory of his father's true marriage with his mother, a memory that has an almost prelapsarian resonance, and a visualization of the concupiscence through which his mother has defiled that sacrament and made Claudius's guilt a part of her own being. This same adulterated image of matrimony lies behind his intense reproaches both against himself and Ophelia in the speech in which he urges Ophelia to go to a nunnery: "Get thee to a nunnery. Why wouldst thou be a breeder of sinners?
I am myself indifferent honest, but yet I could accuse me of such things that it were better my mother had not borne me. I am very proud, revengeful, ambitious, with more offences at my beck than I have thoughts to put them in, imagination to give them shape, or time to act them in. What should such fellows as I do crawling between heaven and earth?" (3.1.123-31).

Some of Hamlet's anger against Ophelia spills over, as it does in this speech, from his rage against his mother, but Ophelia herself gives him cause. There is no reason to doubt her own word, at the beginning of the play, that Hamlet has importuned her "with love / In honorable fashion . . . And hath given countenance to his speech . . . With all the holy vows of heaven" (1.3.110-11, 113-14); and there is certainly no reason to question his own passionate declaration at the end of the play, over her grave, that he loved her deeply:

I loved Ophelia. Forty thousand brothers
Could not, with all their quantity of love,
Make up my sum.

(5.1.267-69)

Both Hamlet's grief and his task constrain him from realizing this love, but Ophelia's own behavior clearly intensifies his frustration and anguish. By keeping the worldly and disbelieving advice of her brother and father as "watchman" to her "heart" (1.3.46), she denies the heart's affection not only in Hamlet but in herself; and both denials add immeasurably to Hamlet's sense of loneliness and loss—and anger. Her rejection of him echoes his mother's inconstancy and denies him the possibility even of imagining the experience of loving and being loved by a woman at a time when he obviously needs such love most profoundly; and her rejection of her own heart reminds him of the evil court whose shadow, he accurately senses, has fallen upon her and directly threatens him. Most of Hamlet's speeches to Ophelia condense all of these feelings. They are spoken from a sense of suppressed as well as rejected love, for the ligaments between him and Ophelia are very deep in the play. It is she who first reports on his melancholy transformation,

with a look so piteous in purport
As if he had been loosèd out of hell
To speak of horrors.

(2.1.83-85)

It is she who remains most acutely conscious of the nobility of mind and form that has, she says, been "blasted with ecstasy" (3.1.163); and it is she, after Hamlet has gone to England, who most painfully takes up his role and absorbs his grief to the point of real madness and suicide. It is no accident that her funeral should decisively crystallize his own preparedness for death.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are less close to Hamlet's heart, and because they are such unequivocal sponges of the King, he can release his anger against them without any ambivalence, but at least initially they too amplify both his and our sense of the increasing emptiness of his world. We are so accustomed to treating Rosencrantz and Guildenstern as vaguely comic twins that we can forget the great warmth with which Hamlet first welcomes them to Denmark and the urgency and openness of his pleas for the continuation of their friendship. "I will not sort you with the rest of my servants," he says to them,

for, to speak to you like an honest man,
I am most dreadfully attended. But in the
beaten way of friendship, what make you
at Elsinore?

Rosencrantz To visit you, my lord, no other occasion.
Hamlet Beggar that I am, I am even poor in thanks, but I thank you; and sure, dear friends, my thanks are too dear a halfpenny. Were you not sent for? Is it your own inclining? Is it a free visitation? Come, deal justly with me. Come, come. Nay, speak. Guildenstern What would we say, my lord? Hamlet Why, anything—but to th'purpose. You were sent for, and there is a kind of confession in your looks which your sties have not craft enough to colour. I know the good King and Queen have sent for you. Rosencrantz To what end, my lord? Hamlet That you must teach me. But let me conjure you by the rights of our fellowship, by the consonancy of our youth, by the obligation of our ever-preserved love, and by what more dear a better proposer could charge you withal, be even and direct with me whether you were sent for or no. (2.2.268-89)

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, of course, cannot be direct with him, and Hamlet cuts his losses with them quite quickly and eventually quite savagely. But it is perhaps no accident that immediately following this exchange, when he must be fully realizing the extent to which, except for Horatio, he is now utterly alone in Denmark with his grief and his task, he gives that grief a voice that includes in its deep sadness and its sympathetic imagination a conspectus of Renaissance thought about the human condition. "I have of late," he tells his former friends,

—but wherefore I know not—lost all my mirth, forgone all custom of exercise; and indeed it goes so heavily with my disposition that this goodly frame, the earth, seems to me a sterile promontory. This most excellent canopy the air, look you, this brave o'erhanging, this majestical roof fretted with golden fire—why, it appeareth no other thing to me than a foul and pestilent congregation of vapours. What a piece of work is man! How noble in reason, how infinite in faculty, in form and moving how express and admirable, in action how like an angel, in apprehension how like a god—the beauty of the world, the paragon of animals! And yet to me what is this quintessence of dust? (2.2.296-309)

"In grief," Freud remarks in "Mourning and Melancholia," "the world becomes poor and empty; in melancholia it is the ego itself." During most of the action of Hamlet we cannot make this distinction. For the first four acts of the play, the world in which Hamlet must exist and act is characterized in all its parts not merely as diseased, but specifically for Hamlet as one that is being emptied of all the human relationships that nourish the ego and give it purpose and vitality. It is a world that is essentially defined—generically, psychically, spiritually—by a ghost whose very countenance, "more / In sorrow than in anger" (1.2.228-29), binds Hamlet to a course of grief that is deeper and wider than any in our literature. It is a world of mourning.
At the beginning of act 5, when Hamlet returns from England, that world seems to change, and Hamlet with it. Neither the countenance of the ghost nor his tormented and tormenting spirit seems any longer to be present in the play, and Hamlet begins to alter in state of mind as he already has in his dress. He stands in the graveyard that visually epitomizes the play's preoccupation with death, a scene that the clowns insistently associate with Adam's sin and Hamlet himself with Cain's, and he contemplates the skull of the man who carried him on his back when he was a small child. The scene resonates with the *memento mori* tradition that has intensified as well as enlarged his suffering from the first:

> Alas, poor Yorick. I knew him, Horatio—a fellow of infinite jest, of most excellent fancy. He hath borne me on his back a thousand times; and now, how abhorred my imagination is! My gorge rises at it. Here hung those lips that I have kissed I know not how oft. Where be your gibes now, your gambols, your songs, your flashes of merriment that were wont to set the table on a roar? Not one now to mock your own grinning? Quite chop-fallen? Now get you to my lady's chamber and tell her, let her paint an inch thick, to this favour she must come. Make her laugh at that.

(5.1.180-90)

This speech suggests the underlying context for Hamlet's earlier attacks not only upon the vanity of his mother and Ophelia but also upon the vanity of all human existence. But his mood now has begun to shift. There is a characteristic inflection of pain and protest in his invocation of an intellectual tradition that was originally designed to promote resignation, and there is a suggestion too, by Horatio, that he is still considering death "too curiously" (5.1.201), but there is no longer the sense that he and his world are conflated in the convulsive activity of grief. That activity seems to be drawing to a close, and his own sense of differentiation is decisively crystallized when, at the end of the scene, in a moment reminiscent of the one in which he reacts to the imitation of Hecuba's grief, he responds to Laertes's enactment of a grief that seems a parody of his own:

> What is he whose grief
> Bears such an emphasis, whose phrase of sorrow
> Conjures the wand'ring stars and makes them stand
> Like wonder-wounded hearers? This is I,
> Hamlet the Dane.

(5.1.251-55)

It is an especially painful but inescapable paradox of Hamlet's tragedy that the final ending of his grief and the liberation of his self should be coextensive with the apprehension of his own death. After agreeing to the duel with Laertes that he is confident of winning, he nevertheless tells Horatio of his premonition of death, "But thou wouldst not think how all here about my heart—but it is no matter" (5.2.158-59); and when Horatio urges him to postpone the duel, he says, in the famous speech that signifies, if it does not explain, the decisive change of his spirit: "Not a whit. We defy augury. There's 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 has aught of what he leaves, what is't to leave betimes?" (5.2.165-70). The theological import of these lines, with their luminous reference to Matthew, has long been recognized, but the particular emphasis upon death suggests a psychological coordinate. For what makes Hamlet's acceptance of Providence finally intelligible and credible to us emotionally, what confirms the truth of it to our own experience, is our sense, as well as his, that the great anguish and struggle of his grief are over, and that he has completed the work of mourning. He speaks to Horatio quietly, almost serenely, with an unexultant calm that characterizes the end of the long, inner struggle of grief. He has looked at the face of death in his father's ghost, he has endured death and loss in all the human beings he has loved, and he now accepts those losses as
an inevitable part of his own condition. "The readiness is all" suggests the crystallization of his awareness of the larger dimension of time that has enveloped his tragedy from the start, including the revenge drama of Fortinbras's grievances on the outskirts of the action and that of the appalling griefs of Polonius's family deep inside it, but the line also most specifically states what is perhaps the last and most difficult task of mourning, his own readiness to die.

The ending of Hamlet's mourning is finally mysterious in the play, as the end of mourning usually is in actual life, but it is made at least partially explicable by the very transfusion of energy between him and the other characters that constitutes his grief to begin with. Early in the play he seems to absorb into himself the whole body of the world's sorrow and protest, as later in the play he seems to expel it. The ghost, I think, he partly exorcises and partly incorporates. He increasingly gives expression to much of its vengeful anger—most definitively, perhaps, when he uses his father's signet to hoist Rosencrantz and Guildenstern on their own petard—but at the same time he thereby eventually frees himself to internalize the "radiance" of his father's memory rather than the ghost's shadow of it. His mother herself cannot really be transformed, but he makes her feel the force of his grief even if she cannot understand it, and in the closet scene at least, he succeeds in transferring some of the pain in his own heart to hers. To Claudius he transfers a good deal more. By means of the play within the play, including his own interpolated lines on mutability, Hamlet at once acts out the deep anger and sorrow of his grief and transmits the fever of their energy to the guilty King in whose blood he thereafter rages "like the hectic" (4.3.68). But perhaps most important, not so much in effecting Hamlet's recovery as in representing its inner dynamics and persuading us of its authenticity, are the transformations that Ophelia and Laertes undergo during the period Hamlet himself is offstage on his voyage to England. Ophelia, as we have seen, drains off Hamlet's incipient madness and suicidal imaginings into her own "weeping brook" (4.7.147) of grief, and she begins to do so precisely at the moment Hamlet leaves the stage for England. She enters "mad, [her hair down, with a lute]" (4.5.20), singing songs which signify not only the consuming pain of the loss of her father but also the self-destructive sexual frustration that has afflicted Hamlet as well as her. At almost the same moment, Laertes enters the stage, and while Hamlet himself later explicitly sees in Laertes's predicament an analogue of his own, Laertes's sorrow and anger are quickly corrupted; and his poisonous allegiance with the King simultaneously dramatizes the most destructive vengeful energies of grief and seems to draw those energies away from Hamlet and into himself. This whole movement of energy between Hamlet and the other characters suggests the symbiotic relation between the protagonists and the secondary characters in the medieval morality drama as well as the unconscious processes of condensation and displacement that are represented in dreams, and its result is our profound sense at the end of the play that Hamlet's self has been reconstituted as well as recovered. That sense is especially clear in act 5 in Hamlet's own entirely conscious and generous relation to Laertes, the double who threatens his life but not his identity, who presents an "image" of his "cause" (5.2.78), but never of the untainted heroic integrity of his grief.

Hamlet's generosity to Laertes at the end of the play is especially significant, I think, because it brings to the surface the underlying inflection of charity that makes Hamlet's whole experience of grief so humane and so remote from the moral or psychological pathology for which many critics, including Freud himself, indict him. In the only mention he makes of Hamlet in "Mourning and Melancholia," Freud remarks that the melancholic often has access to exceptionally deep insights and that his self-criticism can come "very near to self-knowledge; we can only wonder why a man must become ill before he can discover truth of this kind. For there can be no doubt that whoever holds and expresses to others such an opinion of himself—one that Hamlet harboured of himself and all men—that man is ill, whether he speaks the truth or is more or less unfair to himself." In a footnote Freud cites as evidence of Hamlet's misanthropy and sickness his criticism of Polonius: "Use every man after his desert, and who should scape whipping?" (2.2.531-32). What Freud misses, of course, and it is to miss much, is not only that Hamlet becomes all men in his grief, but that he does so in the image of charity that the very line evokes. For the premise of Hamlet's statement, like Portia's in The Merchant of Venice, is "That in the course of justice none of us / Should see salvation," and that therefore
we do pray for mercy,
And that same prayer doth teach us all to render
The deeds of mercy.

(4.1.196-99)

Hamlet's line, to be sure, does not have this explicit emphasis, but in its context there is no question that the motive of his statement is to have Polonius use the players kindly and that the ultimate burden of his thought is, like Portia's, the verse, "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." If the great anger and sorrow of Hamlet's grief makes his own experience of these trespasses tragically acute and painful, the same combination of feelings eventually expands his capacity to understand, if not forgive, them.

I think this generosity and integrity of grief lie close to the heart both of Hamlet's mystery and the play's. *Hamlet* is an immensely complicated tragedy, and anything one says about it leaves one haunted by what has not been said. But precisely in a play whose suggestiveness has no end, it seems especially important to remember what actually happens. Hamlet himself is sometimes most preoccupied with delay, and with the whole attendant metaphysical issue of the relation between thought and action, but as his own experience shows, there is finally no action that can be commensurate with grief, not even the killing of a guilty king, and it is Hamlet's experience of grief, and his recovery from it, to which we ourselves respond most deeply. He is a young man who comes home from his university to find his father dead and his mother remarried to his father's murderer. Subsequently the woman he loves rejects him, he is betrayed by his friends, and finally and most painfully, he is betrayed by a mother whose mutability seems to strike at the heart of human affection. In the midst of these waves of losses, which seem themselves to correspond to the spasms of grief, he is visited by the ghost of his father, who places upon him a proof of love and a task of vengeance that he cannot refuse without denying his own being. The ghost draws upon the emotional taproot of the revenge-play genre and dilates the natural sorrow and anger of Hamlet's multiple griefs until they include all human frailty in their protest and sympathy and touch upon the deepest synapses of grief in our own lives, not only for those who have died, but for those, like ourselves, who are still alive.

Notes


2 I assume throughout this argument that Shakespeare essentially accepts and draws nourishment from the conventions of the revenge drama and that the ghost represents Hamlet's tragic predicament more than he does a strictly moral issue. Shakespeare clearly sophisticates Kyd's conception by conflating the ghost of Andrea and the figure of Revenge and by bringing the ghost directly into the world of the play and into Hamlet's consciousness; but there is little question, either by Hamlet or by us, that Hamlet must eventually obey the ghost's injunction to take revenge. In later dramas like *The Atheist's Tragedy* and *The Revenge of Bussy D'Ambois*, the ghosts themselves remind the heroes that revenge belongs to God, but it is hardly an accident that those plays are neither tragic nor particularly compelling. The whole issue of the ethos of revenge in *Hamlet* is discussed most convincingly, it seems to me, by Helen Gardner in *The Business of Criticism* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1959), pp. 35-51, and Roland M. Frye, *The Renaissance Hamlet* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1984). For a contrary interpretation of the issue, see especially Fredson Bowers, *Elizabethan Revenge Tragedy* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1940), and "Hamlet as Minister and Scourge," *PMLA* 70 (1955): 740-49; and Eleanor Prosser, *Hamlet and Revenge* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1967).


For a similar view of this issue, see Meredith Skura, The Literary Use of the Psychoanalytic Process (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1981), pp. 41-43, 46-53.

The definition of incest between a man and his brother's wife in the Elizabethan period was essentially a legal one—the relationship was prohibited by canon and civil law—but Claudius's actual murder of his brother suggests the deeper psychic implications of incest as well.

For the most illuminating recent discussion of the literary treatment of melancholy in Renaissance England, see Bridget Geliert Lyons, Voices of Melancholy (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1971). Lyons's analysis of Hamlet's melancholy (pp. 77-112) is especially rich, and I found it suggestive for my own argument, though my emphasis and method are different from hers. Campbell discusses the relevance of Elizabethan ideas of grief to Hamlet in Shakespeare's Tragic Heroes, pp. 109-47, but treats the subject rather as the King does, as a moral infirmity.

For a sophisticated discussion of mourning and melancholy in Hamlet that appeared at about the same time as my original essay on the play and proceeds on similar lines, see Alexander Welsh, "The Task of Hamlet," Yale Review 69 (1980): 481-502. The relevance of modern psychoanalytic ideas of mourning to the play is also touched upon by Paul A. Jorgenson, "Hamlet's Therapy," Huntington Library Quarterly 27 (1964): 239-58, and is discussed in more depth, though in ways that quickly become remote from the play, by Lacan, "Desire and the Interpretation of Desire in Hamlet" pp. 11-52.


Ibid., pp. 166, 169-70.

Ibid., p. 170.

C. S. Lewis, "Hamlet: The Prince or the Poem," Proceedings of the British Academy 28 (1942): 138-54. G. Wilson Knight also focuses on "the devil of the knowledge of death, which possesses Hamlet" (The Wheel of Fire [London: Methuen, 1949], p. 39), but Lewis's discussion is less invidious and much more spacious, not least because it takes account of the dramatic impact of the ghost in the play.

See Lyons, Voices of Melancholy, p. 81.

Roland Frye, Renaissance Hamlet, pp. 76-110.

For a full discussion of the traditions of thought that lie behind Hamlet's contemplation of death in this scene, see Roland Frye, *Renaissance Hamlet*, pp. 205-53.


I borrow this formulation, which describes a reversal of the process of identification in depression, from Karl Abraham, who does not himself apply it to Hamlet. In common with many more recent psychoanalytic writers, Abraham argues that an essential part of the resolution of grief consists of the unambivalent and beneficent introjection of the loved person into the mourner's own psyche to compensate for the continuing, conscious sense of loss. See his *Selected Papers* (London: Hogarth Press, 1968), pp. 442, 438.

The therapeutic value of this kind of aggressive transference was accentuated and made quite explicit by Marston in *The Malcontent*; see Lyons, *Voices of Melancholy*, pp. 96-97.


**Richard Hillman (essay date 1986)**


In the following essay, Hillman explores the relationship between loss of meaning in life and death, and maintains that Hamlet is plagued by a "suicidal fatalism" which conflicts with his avowed goal of revenge.

In writing of Hamlet's spiritual isolation and agony, G. Wilson Knight used a phrase which rings resoundingly true: the "knowledge of death." It is a potently catalytic phrase, crystallizing the elusive and Protean melancholy through which Hamlet relates to the world around him. But it is also only a starting point. On the one hand, human experience comprehends infinite ways and degrees of knowing; on the other, death ultimately lies outside that experience: it can only be known indirectly, through imagination. We need then to focus on Hamlet's imaginative encounter with death if we wish to use Knight's insight as a tool of analysis.

Hamlet's first scene should by rights belong to Claudius. He is its mainspring; its opening action is his business; its rhythm is his royal will. Hamlet's spoiling of that rhythm, like Cordelia's silent interruption of Lear's ritual, soon shifts the dramatic focus (and the center of power—Claudius is never really in control again). But even before he speaks, Hamlet has upstaged the king by flaunting "the trappings and the suits of woe" (I.ii.86). He appears as the archetypal figure of death at the feast (here a virtual continuation of the marriage feast, still featuring the funeral leftovers). The disclosures that follow are superimposed on that indelible first impression. When Hamlet gets the stage to himself, the specific death he is memorializing is linked with an acute consciousness of personal and universal mortality. His own "too too sallied flesh" (129) ties him to a world dominated by corruption and decay within—in fact, produced by—natural growth: "'tis an unweeded garden/ That grows to seed, things rank and gross in nature/ Possesses it merely" (135-37).

The oppressive sense of physicality, the organic imagery, of this first soliloquy recur throughout the play as a standard feature of Hamlet's melancholy. Here they help to establish the basic premise of his melancholy: that existence itself is meaningless. Indeed, the thematic connection between the meaninglessness of life and the powerful presence of death is so strong and constant that the two themes are effectively one. The preoccupation with mortality becomes an index of existential despair in the "antic disposition," the "To be, or not to be" soliloquy (III.i.55ff), the graveyard scene, and elsewhere. The connection—not the causality—is all that concerns us here, but it may be argued that a Renaissance audience would recognize a definite psychological pattern: loss of meaning in life leads to a feeling that life is meaningless because death-dominated.
It is a paradox, but not an enigma, that the only refuge Hamlet can envisage is also death—death, that is, conceived as absolute non-being, the melting of flesh, sleeping without dreaming. Consciousness of mortality may be a source of pain, but the real culprit is consciousness itself. Physical death is contrasted with spiritual death, death in life. Here too the first soliloquy defines terms that apply throughout the play. Only in the "To be, or not to be" soliloquy does Hamlet again directly express a longing for extinction, but it is clearly reflected in his attitudes and actions. So, however, is the inability to commit suicide, actively and consciously to embrace extinction, that he initially attributes to the "canon" of the "Everlasting" (I.ii.131-32). This leads to a cornerstone of my argument. I hope to demonstrate that a suicidal fatalism constitutes a powerful psychological undertow, pulling Hamlet, as he swims towards the shore of his revenge, ineluctably out to sea.

So far we have material for a case history, but not for drama. There is no drama because there is no apparent conflict, no movement. Although the inky-cloaked figure has drawn aside an inner curtain, he remains in tableau. What initiates drama, setting in motion the previously static psychological forces, not to mention the plot, is his encounter with the ghost. The ghost has preoccupied many critics, including the psychologists. Unfortunately, questions about its nature and origin cannot be settled on the evidence of the text: finality requires an appeal to some external dogma, such as the notion that all apparitions are diabolical agents. Similarly, the standard psychoanalytic view of the ghost's significance depends on the Oedipal complex. This does not mean that speculation in either scholarly or contemporary psychological terms is illegitimate. In fact, Shakespeare typically makes matters provocative and leaves them open-ended precisely when speculation—even of a kind he could not have anticipated—helps to illuminate substantial issues. I shall eventually be speculating too. But I shall be doing so on the basis of the ghost's demonstrable impact on Hamlet's attitudes towards life and death.

When he imposes upon Hamlet the duty of revenge, the ghost precipitates an acute conflict in Hamlet's consciousness. In effect, he imparts the message that Hamlet's existence is—or should be—far from meaningless, that indeed there is a very specific and urgent source of meaning. Once Hamlet dedicates himself to the ghost's command, an inner voice sustains that message and its corollary—that despair and longing for extinction imply a shameful evasion of a sacred obligation. The voice is strong enough to drive those sentiments underground and transform their expression. The first soliloquy is crucial, then, for in later moments of apparent self-revelation, the problem of fulfilling his task replaces general disaffection from life as the focus of Hamlet's continuing discontent. And even in the "To be, or not to be" soliloquy the suicidal impulse is kept at arm's length.

While Hamlet's obligation is initially and superficially to the ghost, it takes root as an obligation to himself—it is a matter of conscience. If this sounds like a radical statement, it is only because we tend to associate conscience with a socially acceptable sense of right and wrong. Various commentators, indeed, have sought to explain Hamlet's delay by his scruples about revenge, despite the difficulty of documenting such scruples or of reconciling them with the carnage quite casually wreaked by Hamlet among the more innocent. In fact, the only moral responsibility Hamlet consistently acknowledges is to his task; the only constant source of self-blame is his failure to accomplish it. Thus there is in Hamlet a kind of conscience we may call existential, rather than social, dealing as it does with personal meaning in life, however defined. And its presence implies a uniquely human extension of the survival instinct common to all living things—a psychological need for meaning in the face of the uniquely human awareness of inevitable death. Shakespeare, then, seems to be endowing Hamlet with the "will to meaning" which Viktor E. Frankl, originator of so-called "existential" psychiatry, identifies as the basic dynamic force in man, more fundamental than the "pleasure principle" of Freud or the Adlerian "will to power."4 Frankl might almost be describing Hamlet when he relates melancholia to "a feeling of inadequacy in the face of a task" and speaks of "conscientious anxiety or guilt feelings" which result from "obligations that arise out of the responsibility of . . . being."5
One further element of Hamlet's initial attitude towards death can now be added to the picture—a key, as it turns out, to the working of his mind throughout the play. It takes the ghost to confront Hamlet with his "will to meaning," but the first soliloquy's expression of meaninglessness is painful—not a shrug—only because that force is constitutionally present. It is merely being repressed, as Hamlet, attempting to avoid inner conflict, superimposes his perception of life as death-dominated. His glib citation of the divine prohibition against suicide—an uncharacteristic expression of conventional religious scruples—masks deeper, nonetheless conscientious, feelings. The traditional reason-passion dichotomy is at work, with an existential dimension. Both modern psychological theory and Renaissance moral doctrine describe the pattern: the knowledge that we are going to die is a rational inference from experience and observation; our rebellion against death is emotional, a function of instinctual assumptions of immortality, the product of our senses, which cannot, after all, conceive of non-existence. Thus what seems to be an emotional outburst on Hamlet's part depends on the suppression of the most fundamental emotional impulse of all—what Francis Bacon called "the strength of all other human desires."

Approaching the ghost through its existential significance for Hamlet makes it easier to respond to Shakespeare's suggestions as to why and how the ghost possesses that significance. Not only are we putting a lesser burden on the limited evidence, but we have a clear indication of direction: the ghost's influence is exerted through Hamlet's perception of his position in life, his sense of self. The obvious starting point is the fact that Hamlet's task involves a test of a particular emotion—Hamlet's love for his dead father. The very form of the ghost's initial command establishes this, with Hamlet's ambiguous interjection highlighting the point:

If thou didst ever thy dear father love—
Ham. O God!
Ghost. Revenge his foul and most unnatural murther.

(I.v.23-25)

Later the ghost broadens the issue, again in conditional terms, to include Hamlet's possession of natural feelings in general: "If thou hast nature in thee, bear it not" (81). It is the same stick later used by Claudius to goad Laertes, in whom Hamlet sees, as we do, the "portraiture" of his own "cause" (V.ii.77-78). In fact, the king strikingly echoes the ghost of his predecessor: "Laertes, was your father dear to you?" (IV.vii.107). But even without direct formulations or suggestive parallels, a link between Hamlet's commitment to revenge and his love for his father would be apparent. It comes closest to the surface, perhaps, in his self-accusations of slackness after the conversation with the Players and when he encounters the ghost again in the closet scene. Hamlet's dissatisfaction with the progress of his mission thus extends to his attitude towards his father. This has insistent and far-ranging implications. It strongly suggests—and this is, then, one aspect of the Freudian interpretation which may claim textual support—that Hamlet harbors feelings about his father at odds with those which he professes and on which his revenge depends.

This coincides with our first impression that his mourning is unnaturally ostentatious and defensive. Having got him to admit that death is "common," Gertrude, with an edge of exasperation, queries: "If it be,/Why seems it so particular with thee?" (I.ii.74-75). Ignoring her point, which is contained in "particular," Hamlet responds, instead, as if he senses an accusation in "seems": "Seems, madam? nay, it is, I know not'seems" (76). And he proceeds, with striking self-consciousness, to enumerate his outward signs of mourning, claiming that all of these "forms, moods, shapes of grief (82) are inadequate to express what he feels, although he makes no attempt actually to describe his feelings:

. . . These indeed seem,
For they are actions that a man might play,
But I have that within which passes show,
These but the trappings and the suits of woe.
Claudius will remind us of this moment, too, in challenging Laertes's sincerity: "...are you like the painting of a sorrow./ A face without a heart?" (IV.vii. 108-09). Naturally, Hamlet is here attacking Gertrude and Claudius, and "actions that a man might play" alludes to the hollowness of their grief when his father died, but the phrase also helps to convey an uneasiness about his own.

Hamlet's way of speaking about his father sustains and extends this impression. He idealizes the former king extravagantly, actually portraying him as superhuman both in his first soliloquy and in the closet scene. But superhuman seems to imply inhuman. There is little warmth either expressed by himself or attributed to his parent. Even his father's feeling for his mother is described in terms of godlike power: "...so loving to my mother/ That he might not beteem the winds of heaven/ Visit her face too roughly" (140-42). Consistently, the emphasis is on the sort of heroic qualities—"An eye like Mars, to threaten and command" (III.iv.57)—which would impose a difficult burden of emulation on an only son and heir.

Shakespeare quite openly presents a contrast in nature and values between old Hamlet and his son—a contrast pointed up by giving them the same name, as is not the case in extant earlier versions of the story. The former king is from the first established as a type of the heroic; he staked part of his kingdom on single combat with old Fortinbras; he lost his temper during a truce. We later learn that he subdued England. And, of course, his spirit demands revenge. This is a quintessentially "valiant" Hamlet, as Horatio terms him (I.i.84). It is hardly to endorse the romantic stereotype of "young" Hamlet (Horatio so distinguishes the son [170]) to observe that his melancholy, even as it distorts his personality, helps to reveal very different qualities: sensitivity, inclination to the arts, and, above all, a continuously active, super-subtle, electric intelligence. There is life in the critical cliché that he is temperamentally disposed towards thought rather than action.

Hamlet's alienation from the heroic ethic is part of his feeling of inadequacy in the face of his task. Even in his first soliloquy he links his sense of meaninglessness with inferiority to his father's heroic stature when he describes Claudius as "no more like my father/ Than I to Hercules" (I.ii. 152-53). Only in the "mole of nature" speech, however, does he dissociate himself from heroic values, and then only backhandedly, by condemning the coarse revelling custom "More honor'd in the breach than the observance" (I.iv.16). Moreover, those who actually exemplify the heroic receive his admiration and envy—and help us to appreciate his own "falling-off" (the Ghost's phrase for Gertrude's change to Claudius [I.v.47]). Young Fortinbras—worthy bearer of his father's name, death-defying redeemer of his family's honor, ultimate inheritor of the kingdom—would perhaps have been a more suitable son for old Hamlet. Laertes makes a conspicuously committed revenger of his father, no less so because of the qualms he develops about his treachery.

The change Hamlet has undergone is lamented by the distressed Ophelia. She portrays him as having been the consummate Renaissance prince, combining intellectual with martial and courtly accomplishments, highly conscious of his position, and while she is undoubtedly exaggerating, there is no reason not to accept the picture as essentially valid:

The courtier's, soldier's, scholar's, eye, tongue, sword,
Th'expectation and rose of the fair state,
The glass of fashion and the mould of form,
Th'observ'd of all observers . . .

(III.i.151-54)

Such a son could surely have been counted on, in the play's terms, to revenge his father. It seems, then, that with his father's death, by whatever psychological mechanism, this role collapsed, revealing a nature fundamentally at odds with it, yet unable to generate any other source of meaning. When to this is added his
apparent expectation, conveyed through his references to frustrated ambition, that he would succeed his father as king, we must conclude both that Hamlet depended upon his father for his sense of self and that this sense involved a denial of his true feelings parallel to that which he practices throughout the play. This takes us a long way towards understanding why his father's death should have deprived life of its meaning for Hamlet and elicits a definite connection between the problem of meaning and repressed hostility.

Thus the proof of love that the ghost requires is for Hamlet a means of expiating the feelings of guilt produced by less-than-loving impulses. This interpretation is strikingly in accord with modern understanding of the sort of melancholia, developing out of severe grief, with which Hamlet's condition has long been identified. There has been ample clinical confirmation of Freud's theory that the ambivalence present in every close relation can give rise to guilt feelings after the loss of a loved person. Hamlet's symptoms are typical. They include his idealization of the deceased and preoccupation with his image (witness the closet scene, when Hamlet forces his mother to compare likenesses of the two kings). Characteristic, too, is the alteration of his behavior. Afflicted persons may engage in apparently motiveless activities detrimental to their well-being. Changes in relations with friends and relatives are common: a person at once avoids former social contacts and is afraid of alienating them. He may also direct irrational hostility at particular persons, blaming them for the death or even imagining that the death was not natural, although he probably will not take any action against those he accuses. Elements of all these reactions are combined in Hamlet's case with the melancholic's suicidal feelings, loss of interest in the outside world, and sense of worthlessness. It is a condition which, according to Freud, tends to arise out of normal mourning when low self-esteem is involved. Moreover, extreme reactions often occur when the object of inadmissible hostility was also someone on whom the mourner's way of life and place in society depended.

This pattern suggests a straightforward psychological explanation of the violent hostility which Hamlet does express towards his mother. That hostility is associated with both instances of extreme idealization of his father and hence with his insecurity about his own feelings; it is also linked in the closet scene with his difficulty in performing the deed that serves as the love-test. Gertrude's essential crime, in Hamlet's eyes, is emotional betrayal of his father as the result of an ugly passion, and it would seem that he is trying to avoid facing up to the same thing, in effect deceiving his conscience. Indeed, in the closet scene, when his energy is directed towards awakening her remorse, it is almost as if he is seeking to transfer conscience itself to her. The ghost, however, intervenes, enforcing its earlier prohibition: "nor let thy soul contrive/ Against thy mother aught . . ." (I.v.85-86).

We are now ready for a natural extrapolation. There is no need to resist symbolically identifying the ghost with Hamlet's conscience. Such an identification (more the rule than the exception with Shakespearean ghosts) is consistent with—and adds depth to—the idea of the return of his father's spirit, the ghost's incarnation of the heroic, and Hamlet's ambivalent reaction. It also suits the remarkably close connection between the ghost and Hamlet's mind. This is impressed upon us by the ambiguity of the ghost's origin and the fact that it will speak only to Hamlet—in effect, has direct significance only for him. Even before he actually sees it, Hamlet intuits its message. And when it speaks, there is a striking fluidity of communication:

   Ham. Alas, poor ghost!
   Ghost. Pity me not, but lend thy serious hearing
   To what I shall unfold.
   Ham. Speak, I am bound to hear.
   Ghost. So art thou to revenge, when thou shalt hear.
   Ham. What?

(I.v.4-8)
The distance between speakers is far less than between father and daughter in *The Tempest* when Prospero recounts his painful history—the sort of structure Shakespeare might have employed had he wished to convey the ghost's supernatural remoteness from Hamlet. In addition, the ghost's emphasis on his sufferings after death, his own superiority to Claudius, and Gertrude's infidelity to his memory coincides strikingly with Hamlet's preoccupations. Hamlet himself actually links the ghost with his imagination twice, first in suggesting that the devil may have subjected him to this apparition "Out of my weakness and my melancholy" (II.ii.601), later in declaring to Horatio that if Claudius' response to the Mousetrap does not reveal his guilt, "It is a damned ghost that we have seen,/ And my imaginations are as foul/ As Vulcan's stithy" (III.ii.82-84).9

The changing presentation of the ghost mirrors changes in Hamlet's relation with his conscience. The inner force that the ghost represents is at first compelled to take wholly independent form by Hamlet's refusal to acknowledge it. In keeping with Hamlet's incipient recognition of responsibility, which began with his first news of the apparition, the ghost sheds some of this independence by going off alone with Hamlet before it speaks. As soon as its point is made, the specter vanishes, and there is a strong suggestion, as Hamlet reduces and concretizes its message in his "tables," then attempts to keep above its voice in the "cellarage" scene, that he is assimilating the ghost, taking it inside himself.10 This implies not only acknowledgment and acceptance of conscience, however, but the potential for gaining control over it. Indeed, the ghost appears to him only once more, when he is digressing flagrantly from his purpose, as well as disobediently attacking Gertrude. Even so, on this second occasion, the ghost is incompletely objectified and feeble: it is visible only to Hamlet, clad in a nightgown instead of armor, and both less assertive and less effective. Hamlet anticipates its message ("Do you not come your tardy son to chide . . . ?" [III.iv.106 ff.]), thus heading off any real chiding, and warns, improbably, that its appearance may soften his bloodthirsty dedication to his purpose. As if exorcized, the ghost silently "steals away" (134), and never again is Hamlet's commitment challenged by it.

Hamlet needs to gain and keep control over his conscience in order to avoid acknowledging that revenge is a fundamentally unwelcome and uncongenial duty. At only one point during the initial turmoil does he give way to his reluctance and resentment: "The time is out of joint—O cursed spite,/ That ever I was born to set it right!" (I.v. 188-89). But his subsequent self-reproaches for deficient passion, though used to reinforce his resolution, echo that outburst in a way that takes us to the heart of his difficulty in carrying out his task. Revenge, as Shakespeare and a number of his contemporaries present it, is fundamentally an act of passion, though reason must be employed in the performance. And as I have argued, it is essentially to prove his possession of particular emotions—love for his father and the impulse to counteract death's negation of life—that Hamlet undertakes his mission. That dedication, however, is founded on false premises, since these emotions, as functions of his sense of what he ought to feel, are actually rational fabrications, while his true emotions remain repressed. Thus Hamlet has no access to the emotional energy he must tap if he is to fulfill the role of revenger. No matter how hard he tries to reason himself into passion, no matter how successful he denies his real feelings, Hamlet simply cannot make himself believe, on the deepest level, in what he is doing. This is surely the most natural way of understanding the instability of the revenger role and, therefore, Hamlet's delay.

Since Hamlet can keep his conscience at bay only by convincing himself that he is faithful to the ghost's command, his behavior after the initial encounter is largely conditioned by the problem, now at once more difficult and more urgent, of repressing his instinctual faculty and substituting the proper artificial emotions for it. But the other component of his original posture, the inclination to escape his inner burden through simple extinction, accepting death's verdict of meaninglessness, becomes an increasingly important influence. For the very confrontation with his responsibility that makes this inclination unacceptable to consciousness greatly enhances the attraction of the solution. And Hamlet's mission of revenge proves the perfect means, not only of concealing but of advancing his suicidal tendency, for it allows him to create dangers to which he may expose himself on the pretext of passionate commitment to his task.
Hamlet's pretence of emotionalism begins, as we have seen, with the ostentatious mourning which Claudius, playing straight into his hands, dismisses as "To reason most absurd" (I.i.103). The "mole of nature" speech makes a claim, it seems, for a more generalized irrationality, through which Hamlet's distrust of the passions and contempt for the heroic are nonetheless discernible. With his first sight of the ghost, a reckless passionate heroism becomes the essence of the self-image he seeks to develop, while suicidal fatalism slips smoothly into place beneath the surface:

I do not set my life at a pin's fee,
And for my soul, what can it do to that,
Being a thing immortal as itself?

(I.v.65-67)

In contrast to his earlier invocation of the "canon gainst self-slaughter," religion here serves the suicidal impulse: if Hamlet were really concerned about his immortal soul, he would not be in doubt as to what could happen to it.

Hamlet's "antic disposition" similarly advances both his need to appear recklessly irrational and his self-destructiveness. To be perceived as acting contrary to reason now bolsters his sense of dedication to revenge, as do his insinuations of grievance against Claudius. At the same time, his behavior seems to have no practical purpose; certainly, its effect is merely to alert and provoke the king. Hamlet is setting in motion, however unconsciously, the forces that will destroy him. Indeed, the self-fulfilling fatalism built into the "antic disposition" can be related to the element of genuine mental disturbance often perceived in his pretended madness. For his state of mind is characterized, not by the suspension of reason's control over the irrational, but by indulgence of his constant tendency to give way to pure rationality, including the rational perception of life as meaningless and death-dominated. Thus the outstanding feature of his "madness" is his racing intellect, the free association of ideas on rational rather than emotional principles, as manifested, notably, in word-play. Instead of projecting an inner reality upon the outside world, he inflates, distorts, and virtually wallows in his perceptions of that world.

Hamlet's need to repress his real emotions contributes to this unfeigned component of his distraction. When his emotions are aroused and in danger of coming to the surface, his rational faculty must ruthlessly contain them and put the proper substitutes in their place. This helps to account for his agitation and assertiveness, with manic overtones, when he is first attempting to adapt himself to the role of revenger and when, following the success of the Mousetrap, he finds his duty all too plainly set out for him again. Similarly, his extreme treatment of Ophelia can best be explained as involving—and symbolically suggesting—the rejection of his emotional faculty. As she describes it, his behavior in her closet suggests that he is actually identifying himself with the ghost (he looked, she tells us, "As if he had been loosed out of hell/ To speak of horrors" [II.i.80-81]) and ritualistically repudiating their relation—a relation that has evidently been an outlet for true emotion. In the encounter we later witness, Ophelia seems to awaken unacceptable feelings that Hamlet must violently deny; hence he refuses to acknowledge the tokens of his former commitment: "I never gave you aught" (III.i.95). Associating Ophelia with sexuality has the effect of cheapening his emotion, making it contemptible and therefore deserving of repudiation. The probable double meaning of "nunn'ry" (120, 137, etc.) reflects not only the classically melancholic perception of corruption beneath apparent virtue, but also the essential equality in his mind of promiscuity and absolute chastity: either condition would remove Ophelia as the threat which, as a legitimate object of passion, she currently poses to his reason-dictated identity.

The "antic disposition" is hardly sufficient to sustain Hamlet's sense of himself as a revenger, as his self-reproaches and continuing obsession with mortality indicate. Accordingly, he engages in a series of maneuvers calculated to strengthen this sense by appearing to bring revenge closer, if only by proving his commitment to or capacity for it. In fact, these actions, which largely determine the subsequent course of the
play, take him steadily farther from his goal, so that his eventual success becomes fortuitous and highly ironic. At the same time, they serve Hamlet's suicidal fatalism by further goading Claudius and advertising his own vulnerability. And, consistently, the rational element is so pronounced as to vitiate the pretence of strong emotion.

The first of these revenge-substitutes is the Mousetrap, which will supposedly advance Hamlet's cause by testing the veracity of the ghost. Yet its practical value is highly suspect. Hamlet is certain to arouse Claudius further. Public exposure of the king—the obvious possible advantage he might gain—seems to play no part in his thinking, and he makes no attempt to bring it about. (The court apparently puts Claudius's ambiguous reaction down to "choler" [III.ii.303] over what is, after all, a flagrant insult and implicit threat.) Hamlet's soliloquy after the departure of the Players presents his device as conceived in passionate fury—an inspired solution to his chief problem. In fact, the need to test the ghost never occurs to him until the opportunity is thrust into his hands, while the movement in the speech from a complaint of insufficient passion to passionate display is carefully controlled. Following as it does on the heels of Hamlet's intense interest in Pyrrhus, the archetypal ruthless revenger, the soliloquy is all the more clearly self-dramatizing, aimed at supplying a plausible emotional foundation for his surrogate revenge. Shakespeare even suggests, by having Hamlet arrange for the inserted speech before the Players leave the stage, that he has arrived at the idea well before he pretends to have to jog his reason into action with "About, my brains!" (II.ii.588). It seems that he is able to admit even limited guilt over his slackness because he has already developed a means of defusing it. When Claudius's crime is confirmed, however, responsibility is bound to return upon him even more oppressively. Ironically, it is precisely the "conscience of the King" (605) that will prevent Hamlet from deceiving his own.

In the meanwhile, he has not overcome his concern with death any more than he has completely persuaded himself of his dedication to revenge, to judge from the "To be, or not to be" soliloquy. True, that soliloquy does possess a new detachment, which, despite the wish for extinction expressed in it, might indicate an advance over his painfully helpless consciousness of mortality. The source of this detachment, however, precludes any such interpretation. For Hamlet now initiates a psychological sleight-of-hand that proves extremely important to the succeeding action. He begins to deal with his continuing sense of death's domination of existence by reducing it to a simple fear of physical death, susceptible in a straightforward way to two forces—courage, however produced, and intellect, which is Hamlet's natural strength and the medium of the soliloquy itself. It is the same trick he will very shortly employ in his encounter with Ophelia, where threatening love becomes contemptible sex. But this re-definition is of the deepest "question" of all. The principle has been defined by Paul Tillich: "Anxiety strives to become fear, because fear can be met by courage."¹²

As with revenge itself, therefore, Hamlet is turning to substitution and surrogate in an attempt to avoid confronting responsibility. He pretends that he is actually changing the balance of power between himself and death, when in fact he is taking death's negation of life for granted. This evasion is intertwined with another: he can think of mastery of the fear of physical death as bringing him closer to revenge, while beneath the surface it is supporting his suicidal fatalism. These maneuvers will come into their own as the play progresses. Already, however, he is able to provide himself with a further relatively acceptable excuse for his failure to take more decisive action: it is almost with relief that he counts himself among the "cowards" (III.i.82) at the conclusion of the soliloquy.

A rhetorical irony, I believe, unfolds Hamlet's self-deception.¹³ "To be, or not to be" (55) does indeed impress us as the question confronting Hamlet, since "being" and "not being" strongly suggest having meaning in life and not having it, respectively. But Hamlet is actually talking only about physical survival. His main point is that fear of physical death (including fear of consciousness after death and eschatological uncertainty in general) deters him from action that would lead to death, whether suicide or revenge. Indeed, he virtually equates the two—to the point of referring to both collectively as "enterprises of great pitch and moment" (85). This at once confirms that he is thinking of death in physical rather than in existential terms and signals a
distortion of the risk in support of that perspective. We know, however, that action really offers Hamlet an opportunity of overcoming death through meaning, while a passive physical existence implies meaninglessness and so subjection to death. His much-discussed conclusion that "conscience does make cowards of us all" (82) may be intended to highlight the discrepancy: he appears to be using "conscience" to mean "consciousness," hence the sort of intellectual consideration in which he has been engaged, whereas "conscience" in the moral sense demands that he risk physical death in the service of spiritual life.

In his second question, then, which transposes the first into moral and universal terms as if to make his dilemma less immediately painful, Hamlet follows the natural order of thought and creates a simple parallel structure, associating "being" or "life" with the first possible course: "to suffer/The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune" (56-57)—endurance for the sake of survival. "Not being" or "death" is identified with action, which he presents as involving a doomed and desperate heroism: to "take arms against a sea of troubles" (58) suggests a hopeless struggle, even apart from the seeming allusion to suicidal Celtic warriors. It is the prospect of death inherent in this alternative that sets Hamlet thinking directly of non-existence: "To die, to sleep—" (59). Yet on the existential level, chiastic order obtains: the passive choice implies "not being," the active, "being." Thus the notorious difficulty of the first lines, the overlay of reductive syntax and logic upon resistant ideas, is functional: it develops a crucial ironic distinction between our point of view and Hamlet's.

After the success of the Mousetrap, Hamlet takes refuge from his renewed sense of responsibility in verbally abusing his mother—an exercise less obviously concerned with her spiritual welfare than he pretends. That it is a diversion from the course of his duty is highlighted by his failure to seize the salient opportunity for revenge offered him on the way to her closet. The underlying reason for this failure is the same as for his larger one: he does not have access to the emotional energy which would be necessary to initiate an attack on the praying king. Having tried and failed to reason himself into action ("Now might I do it pat . . ." [III.iii.73 ff.], he admits reason in its own guise ("That would be scann'd . . ." [75 ff.]) to supply the pretence that sending the king's soul to heaven would not constitute true revenge—a use of the concept of immortality that tends to strengthen our scepticism concerning his faith.

Hamlet can easily generate violence towards his mother, however, and it reaches out fatally to include Polonius. This murder, in Hamlet's view, manifests his blood-thirsty passion, specifically his capacity for killing Claudius. Yet Shakespeare pointedly portrays Hamlet's lethal response to the noise he hears as a further abdication of responsibility. The unusually careful continuity of scenes leading up to the incident ensures (all the more because of the generally loose conventions of stage time and place) that we do not expect Hamlet to suppose, any more than we do, that the eavesdropper might be the king. He has just passed Claudius, after all, on his way to the chamber. His automatic first response to his mother's horrified, "O me, what hast thou done?" (III.iv.25), is a spontaneous admission of ignorance: "Nay, I know not" (26). Only then does the hopeful thought creep in that he somehow might have accomplished his task: "is it the King?" (26). When the truth is discovered, wishful thinking reverses the balance between fantasy and reality to produce the confident claim that he had believed the eavesdropper to be Claudius: "Thou wretched, rash, intruding fool, farewell!/ I took thee for thy better" (31-32). "Take thy fortune" (32), he adds, expressing a new sense of identification with, hence control over, fate. And when, towards the end of the scene, he depicts himself as the "scourge and minister" (175) of heaven, he even more boldly uses his supposed fidelity to his task to rationalize his irresponsibility. Hamlet has moved still farther from revenge, has indeed substantially hastened his own destruction, but the illusion of commitment has received powerful support.

So strong is this illusion that Hamlet is able not only to disarm the ghost, as suggested earlier, but also to evade the knowledge that his forthcoming journey to England, which he mentions almost casually at the end of the closet scene, promises to put even greater distance between himself and the possibility of achieving meaning. He has been aware, we now learn, both that his recent opportunity of killing Claudius might well be his last for an indefinite period and that failure to act would put his life in danger, for he rightly suspects a plot.
against him. Despite the secret attraction of extinction, conscience compels him to parry the anticipated blow—in such a way, moreover, as to reinforce further his sense of himself as a revenger, since he will be striking at Claudius' agents. The almost grotesque rationality of the projected murder—he looks forward to it as a sort of intellectual game ("'tis the sport to have the enginer/ Hoist with his own petar" [III.iv.206-07])—confirms that he is again intellectually manufacturing evidence of emotional commitment to revenge. Yet there is no indication even that he intends to return to Denmark: in fact, his return is almost wholly beyond his control—and therefore highly ironic.

In his soliloquy on the march of Fortinbras' army just before his departure, Hamlet again focuses on courage and attempts to hold cowardice responsible for his slackness. Not surprisingly, there is an undertone of contempt in his admiration of the soldiers' readiness to face death for "a fantasy and trick of name" (IV.iv.61). This suggests both his real feelings about the heroic ethic and his deep conviction that all self-assertion is pitifully futile. As in the soliloquy proposing the Mousetrap, he can acknowledge even limited guilt only because he has established a revenge substitute. He again uses reason to work himself up to his supposedly passionate resolution: "O, from this time forth./ My thoughts be bloody, or be nothing worth!" (65-66). Indeed, his starting point is the self-revealing assumption that reason must direct him: "Sure He that made us . . . . gave us not/ That capability and godlike reason/ To fust in us unus'd" (36-39). His concession that overactive reason may have caused his delay is understandably guarded—"Bestial oblivion" (40) is, absurdly, given equal weight as a possible cause. More significantly, this admission is made to serve the pretence that fear of physical death is his main obstacle: when he talks of "thinking too precisely on th'event" (41), he surely means "event" in the common sense of "outcome" or "consequences."

Hamlet's new surrogate for revenge involves a carefully managed confrontation with and triumph over death. As it happens, he gets the chance to reinforce this pattern by recklessly courageous conduct during the sea-battle. The attack of the pirates enables him to expose himself to dangerfatalistically while fostering an heroic self-image in defiance of physical death. It is particularly ironic that this action, so thoroughly evasive in character, should bring him face to face with his responsibility again. And yet his unexpected return lends the voyage exploitable symbolic overtones of rebirth, especially in light of his earlier reference to death as "The undiscover'd country, from whose bourn/ No traveller returns" (III.i.78-79). He has provided, after all, surrogate victims not only for Claudius, but for himself.

Hamlet arrives back in Denmark, then, however involuntarily, with a sense of having mastered death and so, he imagines, removed the only barrier to his revenge. In his vaguely menacing declaration to Claudius, "... I am set naked on your kingdom" (IV.vii.43-44), he projects an image of himself as the king's great adversary. Surreptitiously, though, he is inviting conspiracy: "naked" may bring out the suggestion of rebirth, but for Claudius the effect, reinforced by the postscript, "alone" (52), must be to highlight Hamlet's vulnerability. The trap Hamlet has set for himself will shortly be sprung. Indeed, his strong sense of impending doom exposes the fatalism of his deliberate encounter with physical mortality in the graveyard scene. Hamlet evidently wishes further to demonstrate and consolidate his power over death, but the underlying reality of his surrender is powerfully communicated. For even as he applies reason to death to diminish its horror, he associates himself more closely with reason's message of meaninglessness: "Why may not imagination trace the noble dust of Alexander, till'a find it stopping a bunghole?" (V.i.203-04). Even for Horatio, the rationalist, this is reason taken to an extreme—"to consider too curiously" (205).

Before Hamlet's self-destructive impulse finds fulfillment, however, his conscience produces yet another more public renewal of the role of passionate revenger, although the gap between illusion and reality is almost pitifully wide. His obvious pangs of guilt on witnessing Ophelia's funeral have little to do, it seems, with his responsibility for her death—he never refers to this. Instead, they are a direct response to Laertes' passionate outburst, which arouses in him a sense of emotional deficiency. Ophelia's earlier association with his emotional faculty helps to define the threat he perceives. So does the suggestion of passionate defiance of death in Laertes' leap into the grave, when he embraces the corpse and proclaims his wish to be buried with it.
Conscience compels Hamlet to declare his own passion and imitate this leap, challenging Laertes’ identity—"What is he whose grief / Bears such an emphasis" (V.i.254-55)—and asserting his own in self-consciously royal terms: "This is I, / Hamlet the Dane!" (257-58). The role of revenger, his image of himself as his father's son, is at stake. His wildly rhetorical affirmations of grief and love, his defiance of Laertes to absurd proofs of feeling, are flagrant attempts to demonstrate the presence of emotion. Yet here, too, Hamlet's actions secretly advance his suicidal fatalism. He could hardly have chosen a more effective way of impressing Claudius with his increasingly dangerous unpredictability, as well as his openness to countermeasures. And he has even further antagonized Laertes.

Hamlet does his best to sustain, in the final scene, the impetus he has given the role of revenger by interrupting the funeral. In his conversation with Horatio, he triumphantly presents his highly rational machinations against Rosencrantz and Guildenstern as showing "rashness" (V.ii.7)—the very quality he had spontaneously disclaimed with Laertes' hand on his throat (V.i.261). His use of his father's signet to seal the forged letter further links his actions with his task and the assertion of his identity as his father's true son. Now he self-dramatizingly enumerates his injuries at Claudius' hands (V.ii.64 ff.), finally affirming the morality of revenge as if doubt of this has caused his delay. This is a new pretense, and it would be transparent at this point, even if it were not attached to more familiar self-deceptions: the attempt to produce passion intellectually and the identification with a higher power. His reference to "a divinity that shapes our ends, / Rough-hew them how we will" (10-11) conclusively exposes the despairing reality beneath the illusion of commitment: here, in the very shadow of death, Hamlet is objectifying and formalizing his submission to events, to meaninglessness—to death itself, as "ends" helps make us aware. He carries this attitude even further just before the fencing match, when, with intense fatalism, he justifies his imprudence and supposed impetuosity on the grounds that a time is appointed for the death of all things ("If it be now . . ." [220 ff.]). He thereby makes it unmistakable that he anticipates his own, but then defiance of physical death has become, in his mind, an expression of active dedication to revenge. It is surely heroic fortitude and noble scorn for this transitory existence that he wishes to project.

Hamlet's identification with the passionate Laertes ("For by the image of my cause I see/ The portraiture of his" [77-78]) provides an appropriate background for his acquiescence in their specious reconciliation and the fencing match itself. That he senses a plot is self-evident, although direct confirmation of how much he anticipates could hardly be expected. If Hamlet allowed definite suspicions into consciousness, conscience would prevent his participation; as it is, his query about the length of the foils (265) hints at a need to assure himself that he is on his guard, while there is no question that he defends himself against Laertes with all his considerable skill. And, paradoxically, it is conscience, I think, which compels him to continue the match beyond the first hit, refusing the king's offer of drink. For the dramatic and the psychological contexts combine to suggest that Hamlet guesses the wine is poisoned.

Surely, alert and intuitive as we have seen him to be, Hamlet could not fail to suspect the ploy in Claudius' clumsy attempt to make him drink after merely gaining a single hit. And this suspicion cannot be suppressed because it is based on concrete unignorable evidence: the king ostentatiously puts a foreign object, the supposed pearl, into the cup just before urging it on Hamlet. That Hamlet later believes this to have been poison is the point of his sarcastic taunt, "Is thy union here?" (326), and it is far less natural that he should make the connection retrospectively, after the presence of poison is confirmed. When Gertrude drinks, then, Hamlet would also know that she is taking poison, and his ejaculation, "Good madam!" (290), is more likely to be in response to this fact than to her bland encouragement. Any doubt must be dispelled, we sense, by Claudius' urgent "Gertrude, do not drink" (290), presuming that this is spoken within Hamlet's hearing (surely the natural staging). His own refusal, "I dare not drink yet, madam; by and by" (293), resonates, for us, with a secondary meaning: conscience will not permit him to taste death as she has done, but he will follow her in his own way before long.
So understood, his continued participation in the contest comprises a microcosm of the action from the point at which Hamlet is assigned his task: confronted with death in the form of the poisoned cup, he can neither give himself up to it, despite the attraction of oblivion, nor encounter and overcome it through emotion-based action, thus satisfying his conscience. Rather, he continues to expose himself to danger while attempting to sustain the image of himself as capable of such action. When he is wounded by Laertes, however, he cannot any longer ignore the treacherous character of the match, and with Gertrude's collapse response to Claudius himself also becomes necessary. Even so, instead of directly challenging the king, Hamlet diffuses and depersonalizes his accusation in what seems a final attempt, at once feeble and desperate, to avoid responsibility: "O villainy! Ho, let the door be lock'd!/ Treachery! Seek it out" (V.ii.311-12).

Unexpectedly, the answer to his demand comes from Laertes, together with the news that he is virtually a dead man. Hamlet is reacting to this when he echoes Laertes' disclosure of the fatal device: "The point envenom'd too!" (321). Only when he has felt the full impact of the revelation does he exclaim, "Then, venom, to thy work" (322), and turn to attack Claudius. The clear connection, pointed up by "then," between his ability to do so and the knowledge that he is dying implies that this knowledge has liberated his emotions at last. The mechanism is easy to grasp: not only has his suicidal fatalism been fulfilled, but he has expiated his guilt over his father by incurring a similar fate. His sense of an obligation to revenge his father collapses, together with his false reason-produced emotions, and he is free to act according to his own emotional impulses and on his own behalf. It is the injuries to himself, not to his father, which he finally revenges upon Claudius. Thus, contrary to revenge convention, Hamlet makes no reference to his father or to the fulfillment of his task: he merely calls Claudius "incestious, murd'rous, damned Dane" (325)—more an evocation of his general iniquity than an invocation of specific past crimes.

There is another source of energy. Hamlet's impulse to assert himself in the face of death has been liberated with the emotional faculty as a whole. This is confirmed by his strong reaction in his last moments against death. Despite his formulaic "Heaven make thee free of it!" (332) in response to Laertes' wish for forgiveness, he speaks as if he believes he is facing the end of real existence: "the rest is silence" (358). His concern with the proper preservation of his memory impels him to interfere violently with Horatio's attempted suicide; he seeks to project himself into the future through his "dying voice" (356) for Fortinbras' succession. His killing of Claudius, then, again contrary to revenge convention, has not made his own death superfluous: Hamlet's true nature could hardly derive ultimate fulfillment from such an act. It is an essential part of his tragedy that his spirit is freed sufficiently to begin its quest for that nature only by the certainty of imminent death.

It is tragic, too, that Hamlet's private agony is largely lost on the survivors—even on his only friend, who can "Truly deliver" (386) little more than the bare facts. The renewal that Fortinbras effects is of the very heroic values that enslaved and repelled Hamlet. These will now circumscribe his memory:

Let four captains
Bear Hamlet like a soldier to the stage,
For he was likely, had he been put on,
To have prov'd most royal; and for his passage,
The soldiers' music and the rite of war
Speak loudly for him.

(395-400)

The failure to recognize that Hamlet was indeed "put on," confronted with responsibility of the most fundamental kind, implies a failure to grasp the spiritual dimension of mortality, to understand that the final carnage is a metaphor for its ultimate cause:
O proud death,
What feast is toward in thine eternal cell . . .

(364-65)

But that understanding is ours.

Notes


2 The text cited throughout is *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans et al. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974).

3 I have discussed this pattern in "Meaning and Mortality in Some Renaissance Revenge Plays," *University of Toronto Quarterly*, 49 (1979), 1-17.

4 Viktor E. Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*, rev. and enl. ed. of *From Death-Camp to Existentialism*, trans. Ilse Lasch (Boston: Beacon, 1962), p. 99. A recent study by Walter N. King, *Hamlet's Search for Meaning* (Athens, GA: Univ. of Georgia Press, 1982) also finds this theory of Frankl to be relevant (pp. 127-34), although Freud and Erikson are given at least equal weight in his interpretation. While King's work employs some terms and concepts similar to my own, its application of them is very different. He sees Hamlet as engaged in an essentially religious quest, finally fulfilled through faith in divine providence. Hamlet's attitude towards death is not emphasized; the Oedipal complex is.


6 These ideas are expounded, with reference to both Renaissance and modern sources, in my unpublished doctoral thesis, "Mortality and Immortality in Shakespeare's Later Tragedies and Romances," University of Toronto 1976, pp. 1-34.


9 The devil's responsibility for some melancholic visions was, of course, a conventional idea, but Robert Burton in *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (ed. Holbrook Jackson, Everyman's Lib. [London: Dent, 1932]), affirmed that most such visions were self-generated: "But most part it is in the brain that deceives them, although I may not deny but that oftentimes the devil deludes them, takes his opportunity to suggest, and represent vain objects to melancholy men, and such as are ill affected" (I, 427).

10 Despite the contrary opinion of various commentators including A. C. Bradley, *Shakespearian Tragedy*, 2nd ed. (London: Macmillan, 1905), p. 412, and Eleanor Prosser, *Hamlet and Revenge*, 2nd ed. (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1971), p. 140, to keep above the voice seems to me the most convincing reason for Hamlet's shifting ground, since he responds approvingly to it and is attempting consciously to fulfill the injunction to "Swear" (I.v.149, 155, etc.), not to avoid it. While Hamlet assumes that the others also hear the voice, I think that they would react to it more explicitly if they did: as it is, they seem to be reacting merely to Hamlet's strange behavior. This is, however, a minority view—see Harold Jenkins, ed., *Hamlet*, The Arden Shakespeare (London: Methuen, 1982), I.v.159n.

11 See the thorough review of the evidence for such a double meaning by Jenkins, p. 493.

12 Paul Tillich, *The Courage to Be* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1952), p. 39. Tillich has just cited Hamlet's soliloquy to illustrate the principle that existential anxiety underlies the fear of death, although he does not consider that Hamlet may be engaged in the very psychological strategy he goes on to describe.

13 The following reading of the soliloquy takes sides on various long-standing controversies in proposing a substantially new interpretation. A comprehensive discussion of the chief issues and arguments may be found in Jenkins, pp. 484-93, although I by no means agree with all of his conclusions.

14 Jenkins, pp. 490-91.

**Harold Jenkins (essay date 1991)**


*In the following essay, Jenkins responds to the criticism regarding Hamlet's "To be, or not to be" speech, arguing that while it may not seem to be related to Hamlet's particular problems, the speech is evoked by Hamlet's dramatic role as revenger.*

Ham. To be, or not to be, that is the question: 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. To die—to sleep, No more; and by a sleep to say we end The heart-ache and the thousand natural shocks That flesh is heir to: 'tis a consummation...
Devoutly to be wish’d. To die, to sleep:
To sleep, perchance to dream—ay, there’s the rub:
For in that sleep of death what dreams may come,
When we have shuffled off this mortal coil,
Must give us pause—there’s the respect
That makes calamity of so long life.
For who would bear the whips and scorns of time,
Th’oppressor’s wrong, the proud man’s contumely,
The pangs of dispriz’d love, the law’s delay,
The insolence of office, and the spurns
That patient merit of th’unworthy takes,
When he himself might his quietus make
With a bare bodkin? Who would fardels bear,
To grunt and sweat under a weary life,
But that the dread of something after death,
The undiscover’d country, from whose bourn
No traveller returns, puzzles the will,
And makes us rather bear those ills we have
Than fly to others that we know not of?
Thus conscience does make cowards of us all,
And thus the native hue of resolution
Is sicklied o’er with the pale cast of thought,
And enterprises of great pitch and moment
With this regard their currents turn awry
And lose the name of action.

"To be, or not to be, that is the question" is a line which has some claim to be the best known line in Shakespeare, though perhaps not the best understood. It is of course the first line of a famous soliloquy of Hamlet—a "celebrated" speech, to use Dr. Johnson’s word, and one which seems to have been celebrated right from the beginning. It was echoed by other dramatists in Shakespeare’s lifetime. Within half a century of his death we find Samuel Pepys recording in his Diary how he spent a Sunday afternoon indoors learning it off by heart—and he also had it set to music. The first formal critique of the play, published anonymously in 1736, purposely omitted any comment on this speech because its beauties were already known to every English reader. By the time we come to the nineteenth century the habit of learning it off by heart had made it, according to Charles Lamb, "so handled and pawed about by declamatory boys" that he was beyond being able to appreciate it. I hope that is not the case with you in my present audience, because it is with this speech—as of course you will have gathered—that I want to start. Those who may not know it off by heart will, I imagine, be sufficiently familiar with it for me not to have to quote it now at length. But I will pick out what seem to me to be the essential stages in its argument.

To be, or not to be, that is the question:
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 . . .

The alternatives here are passively to suffer or actively to oppose; either to accept whatever life and fortune may inflict on you, or else to defy their onslaught, as expressed in the metaphor of taking arms against a sea of troubles. It is a metaphor that has often been objected to. An essay in Smollett’s *British Magazine* in the
seventeen-sixties said that nothing could be "more ridiculously absurd." You don't take arms against the sea. But that, I presume, is the point. To fight against the sea, a vast and uncontrollable force, is futile, even ridiculous, and will result in your being overwhelmed. It is clear that Hamlet perceives what the likely end will be; for he goes on

And by opposing end them. To die—

The idea has its attractions; "To die—to sleep"; and to sleep, we may suppose, is to end

The heart-ache and the thousand natural shocks
That flesh is heir to.

Such an ending of our troubles is "devoutly to be wished;" and this wish to escape from the pains of living suggests how easily escape may be managed: without the need for a contest with a sea of troubles, one may procure death for oneself.

"For who would bear the whips and scorns of time" (I. 70)—a catalogue of which is given—when he could settle things once and for all with nothing more than a bodkin, a little dagger?

When he himself might his quietus make
With a bare bodkin?

(II.75-6)

But even while this thought of escaping by suicide is being expressed, another thought has already occurred to the speaker. That a peaceful sleep is the end is only one hypothesis: line 61, "by a sleep to say," to put the case that, "we end." There is another possibility: line 65, "to sleep, per chance to dream." And before we reach for the dagger, the thought of "what dreams may come" must "give us pause" (line 68). There is a conflict of impulses as the longing for release from "this mortal coil" meets with the fear of the unknown. And these conflicting impulses come together in the climax of the speech, which also indicates which of them triumphs: line 76ff,

Who would fardels bear,
To grunt and sweat under a weary life,
But that the dread of something after death

... makes us rather bear those ills we have
Than fly to others that we know not of?

And now the fear of the unknown is reinforced by conscience, and conscience, which includes, I take it, the awareness of our own misdeeds, "does make cowards of us all," in our fear of eternal punishment. Our choice is therefore for life, though it is hardly a choice of what is "nobler" when we choose to live only because we fear to die.

Now the remarkable thing about this best-known of Hamlet's soliloquies is that, notwithstanding all it says about the ills we have to bear in this life, it says nothing at all about Hamlet's particular grievances. It makes no reference to his murdered father, nor to the revenge he has promised to take. In this it differs strikingly from all his other soliloquies. Even his first soliloquy, uttered before he knows anything about the murder, is a lament for the father who is dead and for the marriage by which his mother has replaced him. In what we may call the soliloquies of self-reproach the sight of a player weeping for a fiction or of Fortinbras risking thousands of lives for a straw reminds Hamlet that he has a real substantial cause, "a father killed, a mother
stained," and is doing nothing. By contrast the soliloquy of "to be, or not to be" seems strangely unconnected with his personal predicament. Paradoxically this is one reason for its fame: it has been able to be learnt off and recited by generations of schoolboys simply because it is easily detachable from its context. But this detachment makes criticism uncomfortable: from Charles Gildon in 1721 to Martin Dodsworth in 1985 there have been objections to "irrelevance." We look for causes and effects, ask what does this speech arise from or lead on to. The moment when it occurs is after all one of great tension and expectancy. Only in the previous scene—as the text goes, a mere sixty lines back—Hamlet has devised a scheme for testing the King's guilt by having the murder re-enacted in a play, and we are eager to see what happens. On his side the King is engaged on a scheme devised by Polonius to test Hamlet's madness by watching his behaviour to Ophelia. And Ophelia is even now on stage, where she is waiting for Hamlet to notice her—as also indeed are we, in our desire to see these two, for the first time in the play, together. Two plots, then, have been laid, one by Hamlet, and one against him, which will bring his relations with the King and Ophelia to a head. And then plot and counter-plot are both suspended; and just when Hamlet might be supposed to be impatient to know what the result of his play-experiment will be, he occupies his mind and ours with these seemingly relaxed and irrelevant meditations. One could learn a good deal from this sequence about Shakespeare's dramatic technique.

But the critics, as I say, are uncomfortable. This soliloquy "evades the issues," Dodsworth says, it is not "adequate to the situation": and there have been numerous attempts to make it more adequate by relating it to the circumstances in which Hamlet utters it, to apply the question of "to be, or not to be" to some specific choice which the speaker is having to make. Malone held that Hamlet was debating "whether he should continue to live or put an end to his life," and Malone is representative of a long line of critics who suppose Hamlet to be actually contemplating suicide. It is a line not yet extinct: the Diaries of Peter Hall regard this speech as expressing Hamlet's "current problem"—was he to be or not? Others suppose that "the question" is not whether Hamlet shall kill himself, but whether he shall kill the King. Kenneth Muir says the alternatives are "whether to endure the reign of the usurping murderer . . . or to attempt to kill" him. There was also an article a while since which insisted that "the question" must concern Hamlet's immediate problem and is therefore whether he shall go ahead with his murder-play at all. And just a few years ago another article, in The Modern Language Quarterly, came up with a solution to end all solutions: Hamlet, it supposed, must have caught sight of the King and Polonius as they slipped into their hiding-place to eavesdrop on his meeting with Ophelia and so deliberately avoids all reference to his own affairs in order to put the listeners off the scent. It seems, however, something of a letdown, don't you think, to discover that this wonderful speech is a fake?

What all these interpretations have in common is that they assume the speech to be occasioned by some particular circumstance. Even Kittredge, who insists that Hamlet's reflections are not personal but general, finds it necessary to explain what provokes them: it is the weary wait before Hamlet's plan can be executed that induces a depression of spirits which leads to thoughts of death. And no less a person than Dr. Johnson supposed that Hamlet would have applied these general reflections to his own case if he hadn't happened to be interrupted by discovering Ophelia.

But since he discovers Ophelia when it suits the dramatist that he shall, must we not rather conclude that he could have discussed his own case if it had been the dramatist's purpose that he should? Is it then that the soliloquy is inadequate in that it "evades the issues," or we who inadequately perceive what the issues are? One book on Shakespeare which dares to ignore tradition takes a fresh look at the problem. Justly observing that Hamlet's question arises from nothing specific in the text, it decides that "it could refer to whether or not to carry out revenge on his uncle," "whether to live or die," but "could apply to almost anything," so that "one is not sure—nor does Hamlet seem sure—what it means." But I venture to think that Shakespeare would have been somewhat surprised to learn that.
For the question itself, surely, whatever you choose to make of it, is perfectly precise. "To be, or not to be," esse aut non esse—taking the verb in its absolute and basic sense, if one were able to choose, would one choose to exist or not? or, since to put the question at all, one must already have being, would one choose one's existence to continue or to cease? The question is thus a fundamental one—has indeed been called the fundamental one—concerning human life, the desirability of having it at all. But like so much else in Hamlet, it is not a novel question; it has been since ancient times a traditional matter of debate. One finds Augustine, for example, in his treatise on Free Will (De Libero Arbitrio), arguing the proposition that a man would rather be unhappy than not be at all. Augustine pertinently observes that many who are unhappy yet show no wish to die; but he tries to put all hypotheses, and he can envisage a man retorting, "If I am unwilling to die, it is not because I would rather be unhappy than not be at all; it is because I fear that after death I may be still more unhappy." This is of course the position that Hamlet arrives at when he admits that "the dread of something after death" makes "cowards of us all" and so causes us to go on living. Hamlet, no less than Augustine, is working out a theorem, which is of general application. Throughout the soliloquy, we notice, the first person singular does not occur. The argument is concerned with "the shocks that flesh is heir to" (all flesh), with what happens to "us all." Hamlet is not deciding on a course of action for himself, and I think we need not suppose there was ever any serious danger that the hypothetical bodkin might be brought into use.

Why, though, since it seems not to be prompted by present circumstances, why is Hamlet busy with this theorem, and why does he argue it now? Perhaps this question is best answered by another. When the Players arrive and Hamlet calls on one of them for "a passionate speech," why does he choose the tale of "Priam's slaughter?" Priam, a king who had fifty sons, is the archetypal royal father, and here is a prince who has to avenge his royal father's murder asking to hear recited how Priam was killed. But that surely does not mean that Hamlet asks for the story of Priam's death because he is brooding on his father's, nor, as I have found suggested, that he looks to Pyrrhus, the killer of Priam, for some hints about revenge. The analogies arise not so much in Hamlet's mind as in Shakespeare's, an explanation of them is less likely to be found in the psychology of the unconscious than in the principles of dramatic design. (Similarly, the songs which exhibit Ophelia's madness do not describe her own plight; but they are related to her plight because they are all variations on the archetypal theme of the maid who is forsaken by her lover.) The need for the Player to recite a speech gives the dramatist the opportunity to introduce in another key a variation on the theme of the killing of a king and father with its concomitants of cruelty, vengeance, and grief. In something of the same way, when the play requires Hamlet in his solitary musing to be confronted with Ophelia and some moments have to pass before he sees her, Shakespeare takes the opportunity to make the subject of Hamlet's musing a variation on a basic theme of the play. What I want to suggest is that the question of "to be, or not to be," though it does not relate directly to Hamlet's particular problems, is nevertheless evoked by Hamlet's dramatic role, so that the hero's particular dilemma is set in context with an archetypal dilemma which enables it to be viewed in a universal perspective.

What, then, is Hamlet's dramatic role? And what is it in this role which can provoke this large question of whether life is better escaped from or endured? At its simplest the role is the familiar Elizabethan one of a revenger, and its essentials, I hardly have to tell you, are given us by an old Danish story as we have it in Saxo Grammaticus and as it was retold in Shakespeare's lifetime by the Frenchman Belieferest—the story of a prince who has to avenge his father, when the father has been murdered by his own brother for his kingdom and his queen. This story, before it came to Shakespeare, had already been the subject of an older play now lost but known to have added the Ghost "which cried so miserably at the Theatre, like an oyster-wife, Hamlet, revenge." The obvious effect of the Ghost is to give the call to revenge an added dramatic power. This is not merely a matter of theatrical sensation, though it is that. A command that comes from beyond our mortal world has a more than mortal authority, which a man is not expected to resist; and when the Ghost ultimately speaks to Hamlet (in a scene which has always been acclaimed as one of the most powerful ever written for the English stage), the command which it delivers and Hamlet accepts has tremendous solemnity and awe. Yet it is important to observe that what the Ghost appeals to is the natural human instinct, the force which binds the son to the father in filial allegiance and love.
If thou didst ever thy dear father love...
Revenge his foul and most unnatural murder.

And again,

If thou hast nature in thee, bear it not.

It is, then, an impulse inherent in man's nature that the supernatural voice here reinforces.

Put thus, the command, I take it, is one of which the play expects us to approve. Whatever we may think of the primitive code of requiting murder with murder, and although Elizabethan divines preached against revenge, the Hamlet story clearly belongs to an ethos in which the duty of the son to avenge the father is unquestioned. Already in Saxo, in the persons of the two brother kings, the murderer and his victim, good and bad, are diametrically opposed. The moral contrast is consciously developed by Belieferest, and the full resources of Shakespeare's art are used to heighten it. "Murder most foul, as in the best it is," is here intensified: "most foul, strange"—and in the murder of a brother by a brother—"unnatural." As described by the Ghost, the secret crime, sensational both in method and effect, with the magically potent poison curdling the blood and covering the body with a leprous crust, becomes a deed of fabulous horror. When its perpetrator is referred to as a "serpent," we respond to the satanic connotations of the word. He is further denounced as "that incestuous, that adulterous beast," whose seduction of the Queen from her virtuous husband shows how Lust will desert a "radiant angel" and instead "prey on garbage." Such imagery, celestial and bestial, is recurrent. Hamlet, in his first soliloquy, before he knew anything of the murder or the full extent of his mother's "frailty," reflected that "a beast that wants discourse of reason / Would have mourned longer" than she did for a husband who was, compared to her present husband, "Hyperion to a satyr." This striking image sets against one another the god of the sun in human form and a creature who is part man and part beast.

The play is constantly reminding us of the dual nature of man as the Renaissance mind conceived him: in his intellect he is like a god, while he shares the appetites of the beasts. And in the figures of the two brother kings the complementary attributes of man—nobility and baseness, the animal and the god—are separately embodied and opposed. When in the Queen's chamber Hamlet shows his mother the pictures of her two husbands, the first combines the attributes of various gods:

Hyperion's curls, the front of Jove himself,
An eye like Mars
—to give a portrait of an ideal and perfect man; while the second husband, who has stolen the kingdom, is one with whom she lives

In the rank sweat of an enseamed bed,
Stew'd in corruption, honeying and making love
Over the nasty sty.

Again the suggestion of bestial sensuality. Through such imagery the play presents a moral vision of a kingdom in which the godlike man is dead, overcome and supplanted by the beastlike; and it enables us to see Hamlet's task of revenge as the destruction of the satyr and the restoration of Hyperion. He himself recognizes what the familiarity of the words should not prevent us from recognizing too, that "the time is out or joint" and that it is his task "to set it right."

Hamlet, then, by the promptings of his own nature reinforced by the authority of the Ghost, seems to be called upon to take the part of outraged virtue against vice. But the Ghost, as well as lending a supernatural authority, creates dangers, mysteries, uncertainties. From the beginning its status is ambiguous. The "thing.\n
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that appears to the soldiers on the watch "like the King that's dead"—is it the ghost of Hamlet's father or an evil spirit which may "assume" his "father's person"? If the second, Hamlet knows that in having to do with it at all he risks damnation. Horatio warns him against following it lest it tempt him to destruction. What it is and whether it portends harm is a source of dreadful apprehension. Yet when Hamlet finally confronts it, its solemn proclamation, "I am thy father's spirit," and its vivid tale of his uncle's crime carry such conviction that he assures his companions,

It is an honest ghost, that let me tell you.

Later of course it suits the play to let Hamlet's doubts return:

The spirit that I have seen
May be a devil . . . . .
and perhaps . . .
Abuses me to damn me.

But when the stratagem of re-enacting the murder in a play has succeeded in making the King betray his guilt, Hamlet says he "will take the Ghost's word for a thousand pound," and he never doubts it again. Significantly, when it reappears in his mother's chamber, he accepts it without question as his father "in his habit as he lived" and, accepting it, acknowledges himself a "tardy son" who "lets go by" the performance of the "dread command." There are of course critics who, themselves disapproving of revenge, regard the command as wicked. For Wilson Knight it is "devilish"; and one whole book has been written to maintain with much erudition that the Ghost was an evil spirit which should not have been obeyed. One reviewer of my edition of the play was extremely scornful because I had failed to perceive that the Ghost is an infernal spirit anxious only to get Hamlet into its toils. But that is not the view that Hamlet comes to, nor, I make bold to say, is it one that the play endorses. And it would be a much lesser play, to my mind, if it did. Once the Ghost is finally established as a truthful witness and, hence, as what it claims to be, Hamlet never questions that he should fulfil the mission it has assigned to him. The burden of his self-complaint is that he has not already done so.

Yet although the Ghost's authority has thus to be obeyed if Hamlet is to be true to his nature and his lineage, the doubts about the ghost have raised questions concerning the good or evil of its purposes. At the dramatically emphatic moment when Hamlet first encountered it the crucial alternatives were three times put:

Be thou a spirit of health or goblin damn'd,
Bring with thee airs from heaven or blasts from hell,
Be thy intents wicked or charitable . . .

There are terrible uncertainties which the acceptance of the Ghost's story does not quite dispel. When the Ghost leaves Hamlet on the words "Remember me," the speech in which he vows to do so begins

O all you host of heaven! O earth! What else?
And shall I couple hell?

This sinister question may stay in our minds as Hamlet's demand for his companions to swear secrecy is echoed by the Ghost's voice from below. Later he does couple hell when, in the soliloquy on the Player at the end of the second act, he reproaches himself for inaction in a revenge to which he is "prompted . . . by heaven and hell." Does the play not suggest therefore that the spirit to whose command he cannot but respond is subject to both heavenly and hellish influences? The father in whom he perceives man like a god died after all in his human imperfections and speaks to Hamlet with his sins still unpurged. The nature through which the son and father are united and by which and to which the Ghost appeals may have both good and evil in it.
There is indeed something alarming, even horrifying, in Hamlet's reaction to the success of his play in proving the Ghost true and Claudius guilty. In the moment of his triumph his taunting of the King rises to a kind of savage glee, and as soon as he is alone his mood responds to "the witching time of night,"

> When churchyards yawn and hell itself breathes out
> Contagion to this world.

This passage is sometimes passed over as mere Senecan rhetoric, but I think it must be taken seriously as suggesting that Hamlet in this mood has the contagion of hell upon him. There are hints of witches and vampires when he boasts

> Now could I drink hot blood,
> And do such bitter business as the day
> Would quake to look on.

And he is surely not yet free of hell's contagion when he straightway finds the King on his knees and, having drawn his sword to kill him while he is praying, decides to wait for an opportunity of killing him in his sins so that his soul may go to damnation. Dr. Johnson recoiled from such a thought as "too horrible to be read or to be uttered"; but a more sentimental criticism was able to explain that the "sweet prince" could not possibly have meant it and was only finding excuses for his reluctance to kill a defenseless man.

Yet it has been amply shown that in Elizabethan literature a connoisseur of revenge would seek to destroy his foe, soul as well as body. There is the notorious example related by Thomas Nashe and others of a victim who was promised his life if he would abjure God's mercy and then in the moment of doing so was killed before he had time to repent. Wilson Knight justly remarks that Hamlet's desire for the King's damnation takes revenge to its "logical and hateful" extreme; but if it therefore illumines and implicitly condemns the very nature of revenge, that is something which Shakespeare must surely have perceived and indeed purposed. The play in some of its central scenes shows that revenge, even when undertaken to requite the bad man who destroys the good, may have hate and vindictiveness at its core. And that Hamlet was not in fact restrained by scruples about killing a defenceless man appears from the very next scene; for he goes straight from sparing the King at prayer to kill like a rat the man behind the arras who squeaks for help. The pursuit of revenge involves a readiness to shed blood.

That the dramatist saw quite clearly the dreadful potentialities of revenge is apparent from his presentation of other revengers in the play. Fortinbras, aiming to recover what his father lost, sharks up his "lawless resolutes" and threatens war on Denmark. Laertes actually brings war into the palace. He gloats over the prospect of killing his foe, and for the satisfactions of revenge he courts his own damnation. But especially significant, I think, are those figures who occur not in the story of Hamlet himself but in those inset dramas which give a heightened reflection of it. First, Pyrrhus in the play-excerpt describing "Priam's slaughter." "The hellish Pyrrhus," as he is called, black as the night in armour as in purpose, yet red from head to foot with blood, is the very symbol of a killer and, as he seeks out Priam, the Trojan King and father, a monstrous version of Claudius. Yet Pyrrhus, whose father Achilles was slain by a Trojan prince, is also a revenger, who compares and contrasts with Hamlet. Like Hamlet he momentarily stood with poised sword and "did nothing," but then, aroused to vengeance, with gigantic blows he fell on Priam and with his sword chopped up his aged limbs. In such a figure the appalling potentialities of both killer and revenger are contained, and the two are ultimately indistinguishable.

So too with Lucianus in the play of *The Murder of Gonzago*. Lucianus, murdering a sleeping king by pouring poison in his ears, is the exact replica of Claudius: but when he is announced not as brother but "nephew to the King," he suddenly identifies with Hamlet. The ambivalence of his role continues when Hamlet, impatient, urges him, first, "Begin, murderer . . . begin" and immediately goes on, "The croaking raven doth
bellow for revenge." Murder and revenge appear to be equated. And finally, the murderer's single speech, an
invocation to a midnight poison distilled under a witches' curse, will find an echo in that speech of Hamlet's
which I have already cited vaunting his readiness for a deed which "the day would quake to look on." Such
things are surely clues, though singularly little followed up in criticism, which enable one to see how the
dramatist regards the revenger. The play never directly discusses, nor permits Hamlet to discuss, the ethics of
revenge; but it says much to our imagination when the revenger's role keeps merging with that of the murderer
himself.

Now this, I take it, is what ultimately happens in the case of the hero of the play; and it happens of course
when Hamlet kills Polonius. When the Ghost appears in the Queen's chamber and Hamlet confesses that he
has neglected the command to revenge, there is something very ironic in the presence of Polonius's corpse
lying on the stage as a sign of what Hamlet has done. In the old Danish story, when Hamlet kills the spy in his
mother's chamber, he throws the body in the sewer, where pigs soon make an end of it. But this is not the end
of it in Shakespeare, where the nuisance of the corpse persists, spreading its stench of corruption; and where
the dead man has a son, so that the "rash and bloody deed" has its inevitable consequence in the son's
determination on revenge. Hence the role of the hero significantly shifts. The man who is summoned to
avenge his father becomes the killer of another man's father, and the compulsion on Laertes to avenge his
father, though without a ghost to enforce it, may be seen to repeat Hamlet's case. As Hamlet will say in the
final scene,

    by the image of my cause I see
    The portraiture of his.

But in the cause of Laertes, Hamlet is in the position that in Hamlet's own cause is occupied by Claudius:
Hamlet must avenge King Hamlet, who has been killed by Claudius; Laertes must avenge Polonius, who has
been killed by Hamlet. The tragedy reveals that in actions of revenge the same man may play both parts. In
seeking to right a wrong he may commit one and have to suffer a penalty such as he himself inflicts. Looking
down on the corpse of Polonius, Hamlet says

    heaven hath pleas'd it so,
    To punish me with this and this with me.

Polonius, the King's spy and surrogate, suffers at the hands of Hamlet, who is himself punished by the guilt
which he has accordingly to bear. It is this dual role of Hamlet's that ultimately gives the play its shape. And it
is clear that Shakespeare so designed it from the start. For, although Laertes has nothing to do until after his
father has been killed when the play is over halfway through, he is from the first made prominent. In the first
act, which has its climax when Hamlet receives the command from his father's ghost, Laertes is shown with
his father, who, having given him leave to depart, speeds him on his way with a blessing and a famous speech
of fatherly advice, and even then sends after him to spy out what he is up to. T.S. Eliot oddly thought these
scenes otiose, "unexplained scenes . . . for which there is little excuse"; but they begin the story of the
antagonist, who in a revenge play will have to work the hero's death. When Hamlet kills the father, the son
must be expected to take action. As revenger Laertes exhibits, along with the nature and duty of a son, all the
less admirable features, and finally shows himself a fit partner for the murderer Claudius when he kills
treacherously by poison. But through Laertes's revenge Hamlet has already received his death-wound when he
at length achieves his own revenge by giving Claudius his.

The story of Hamlet's revenge, then, as Shakespeare's play presents it, is of a dual revenge which is both
righteous and guilty. The hero, in his respect for his father, is true to the approved instincts of nature. In
admiration of the godlike man he upholds the cause of virtue. But his own virtue is stained by the presence of
baser passions and their consequence; so that the revenger becomes contaminated with the guilt which he
would punish. The hero to whom is assigned a role in which good is thus mingled with evil might well be
reluctant to perform it; and indeed, although Hamlet never acknowledges reluctance, nor, once the Ghost's identity is established, questions what he ought to do, something very like reluctance seems to be dramatized for us in his continual and inexplicable failure to act. In a revenge play, where revenge is the hero's function and raison D'etre, the hero who lets go by the acting of the dread command may come to symbolize all those whom life confronts with a destiny they would escape from if they could. The situation in which Hamlet is shown to hesitate seems to invite the question "To be." But the question is nevertheless not "To be, or not to be a revenger"; Hamlet never questions that he is required to be that. When the question is asked, in the very centre of the play, it is applied to the universal man in whom the particular revenger is subsumed. "To be," for a man who has man's nature in him, includes the conflicting passions which the play recognizes in revenge. Indeed, is it not the concept of revenge, as compounded of good and evil, which attracts into the play all those ideas about the nature of man as partaking of both god and beast? And so doing, it gives us a hero who is summoned to remember his heritage, to live out his human destiny, and whose wish is to decline.

For whatever may be said or not said about Hamlet's role as a revenger, his dissatisfaction with the role of man in this world is notoriously stamped upon the play. The famous eulogy, "What piece of work is a man, how noble in reason, how infinite in faculties . . . how like an angel . . . how like a god," ends with the "quintessence of dust" and with Hamlet's explicit declaration, "Man delights not me." And his dissatisfaction with man is exemplified in many scattered observations. He finds no honesty in the world; the fickle public who scorned his uncle in his father's time now give good money for his picture; the Queen shows the falseness of marriage vows; it is the nature of beautiful women to be unchaste. The world is like a garden in which all that flourishes are the weeds, the things in nature which are "rank and gross." "Conception is a blessing," but the example of procreation that Hamlet gives is that of the sun breeding maggots in a dead dog. In such a world he has lost all his mirth; he has bad dreams; Denmark is a prison. At the heart of his dissatisfaction of course is the knowledge that what disgusts him in life is present in himself. It is the sense of his own defilement which opens his first soliloquy with a wish—if you will permit this reading—that his "sullied flesh" would melt. As he says in his scene with Ophelia, he feels himself to belong to a diseased stock, which, despite anything you graft on to it, will still retain its original taint. His first words to Ophelia request her to pray for his sins, and he presently adds that he could accuse himself of such things that it were better his mother had not borne him. "What," he asks, "should such fellows as I do crawling between earth and heaven?" In fact, what justification can there be for his existence? Perhaps we ought not to be surprised, at least ought not to find it irrelevant, if all Hamlet's questions about what he and fellows like him are doing in the world focus in the centre of the play upon the all-embracing question "To be, or not to be."

The answer which the famous soliloquy gives might be described as a grudging affirmative: one decides in favour of life from a fear that death might be worse. That (as exemplified by Augustine) seems to be the traditional answer. But the answer that springs from Hamlet when he speaks of his own individual plight and gives vent to his personal feelings is most often negative, the answer which Augustine thought improbable and even reprehensible. His first soliloquy opens with a wish that he could melt away or that the everlasting God had not forbidden self-slaughter. He wishes he could choose "not to be." Polonius has only to ask if he will "walk out of the air" to get the answer "Into my grave?" And Hamlet confides in Ophelia that it might have been better if he had never been born.

This negative answer of Hamlet's is nowhere more apparent than in his dealings with Ophelia. It seems to me very strange that this unhappy love-story has often been thought obscure; its significance is hardly in doubt. Ophelia is the woman Hamlet has loved and hoped to marry; but in their famous encounter in the middle of the play (in fact directly after the "To be, or not to be" soliloquy), he denies his love, denounces marriage, and bids her go to a nunnery. The reason why he rejects her is made clear; for when Ophelia confesses that she has believed in his love and betrays that she has returned it, he exclaims "Why, wouldst thou be a breeder of sinners?" Love and marriage lead to the propagation of one's kind; and the man who wishes he had not been born or that he could escape from the world by dying recoils from passing his life on. The rejection of Ophelia poignantly dramatizes Hamlet's rejection of life and its opportunities for love, marriage and procreation. It is
Yet this negative answer is not the play's final answer. In the last act we find Hamlet in the churchyard with the grave-digger, who took up his trade he tells us, on the day of Hamlet's birth. This will remind us that from the day a man enters the world his grave is being dug; and as Hamlet looks at the hideously grinning skulls he recognizes that this is what all men come to. So he sees death as natural; it belongs to the pattern of existence. Accordingly it is neither feared nor welcomed; and when Hamlet has a presentiment of his own death he can say "If it be now,'tis not to come . . . if it be not now, yet it will come. The readiness is all." And the hero's readiness to accept his mortal destiny coincides, we notice, with this readiness to do the deed of revenge which he has so long delayed. Thinking of the King he says "Is't not perfect conscience / To quit him with this arm?" And although time is short, he says "The interim is mine." There are other indications that he now accepts what he formerly rejected. When he announces himself as "Hamlet the Dane," he claims the monarch's title: Denmark, which he once called a prison, is now his kingdom. At Ophelia's funeral he asserts the love he formerly denied. Finally he does vengeance on the King, though at the cost of his own life. For the avenger of Claudius's crime suffers for a like crime of his own when Laertes takes vengeance on him, while at the same time Laertes with the poison on his sword is repeating Claudius's crime, for which he also dies when the sword is turned against him. Yet these two revengers, both noble and both guilty, in killing one another also forgive and absolve one another.

Hamlet always seems to me a very moral play. It recognizes original sin, the presence of evil in man's nature; and it accepts that guilt must be atoned for, as in the catastrophe it is. But for all that, it does not commend a negative virtue, or, to use Milton's word, a fugitive virtue, which consists in avoiding rather than confronting life's challenge. It offers us a hero who, in a world where good and evil inseparably mingle, is tempted to shun the human lot but comes at length to embrace it, choosing finally "to be."

Notes

1 The text of a lecture originally given to the Association Belgo-Britannique in Liège on 23 February 1983 and subsequently, in the revised form here printed, on the occasion of an International Shakespeare Seminar in Delhi, 5 December 1989.

2 Shakespeare, Plays, 1765, viii.207; quoted in the Furness Variorum Hamlet, i.204.

3 Diary, 13 November 1664.

4 See Shakespeare Quarterly VI (1955), 161-70.

5 [George Stubbes], Some Reflections on the Tragedy of Hamlet, 1736, p. 38.

6 "On the Tragedies of Shakespeare, considered with reference to their Fitness for Stage Representation" (Lamb, Works, ed. Lucas, 1912, i. 115.)

7 "On Metaphors." Goldsmith, Works, ed. Gibbs, 1884, i.370. Though formerly included in editions of Goldsmith, this essay is no longer attributed to him and is probably by Smollett. See PMLA, xxxix (1924), 325-42.

8 The Laws of Poetry, 1721, p. 206: "That famous soliloquy, which has been so much cried up in Hamlet. . . as it was produced by nothing before, so has it no manner of influence on what follows after, and is therefore a perfectly detached piece, and has nothing to do in the play."
Hamlet Closely Observed, 1985, p.110: "His speech . . . must be felt by us as not altogether adequate to the situation actually obtaining for him; it is tainted by irrelevance." Cf. also pp. 111-12.

Shakespeare, Plays and Poems, 1790, ix.286; quoted in the Furness Variorum Hamlet, i. 205.

Diaries, 1983, p. 188.

Shakespeare: Hamlet, 1963, p. 34.


J.E. Hirsh, "The 'To be, or not to be' Scene and the Conventions of Shakespeare's Drama" MLQ, XLII (1981), 115-36.

Hamlet, ed. G.L. Kittredge, 1939, p. 208.

Shakespeare, Plays, 1765, viii. 207; quoted in the Furness Variorum Hamlet, i.205.


De Libero Arbitrio, III. vi. 19.

Thomas Lodge, Wit's Misery, 1596, p. 56.


Shakespeare, Plays, 1765, viii; 236; quoted in the Furness Variorum Hamlet, i.283.

For some instances of this aberrant but once fashionable interpretation see Hamlet, Arden ed. 1982, pp. 513-14.

The Wheel of Fire, revised edn. 1949, p. 318 n.

Selected Essays, 1932, p. 143.

Areopagitica, 7th paragraph (Milton, Complete Prose, Yale, ii. 515).

Hamlet (Vol. 44): Secondary Characters

Carolyn G. Heilbrun (essay date 1957)

In the following essay, originally published in 1957, Heilbrun argues that the traditional critical opinion of Gertrude as shallow and feminine ("in the pejorative sense") is wrong. Heilbrun instead asserts that Gertrude is "strong-minded, intelligent, succinct, and, apart from this passion [Gertrude's lust] sensible."

The character of Hamlet's mother has not received the specific critical attention it deserves. Moreover, the traditional account of her personality as rendered by the critics will not stand up under close scrutiny of Shakespeare's play.

None of the critics of course has failed to see Gertrude as vital to the action of the play; not only is she the mother of the hero, the widow of the Ghost, and the wife of the current King of Denmark, but the fact of her hasty and, to the Elizabethans, incestuous marriage, the whole question of her "falling off," occupies a position of barely secondary importance in the mind of her son, and of the Ghost. Indeed, Freud and Jones see her, the object of Hamlet's Oedipus complex, as central to the motivation of the play. But the critics, with no exception that I have been able to find, have accepted Hamlet's word "fraility" as applying to her whole personality, and have seen in her not one weakness, or passion in the Elizabethan sense, but a character of which weakness and lack of depth and vigorous intelligence are the entire explanation. Of her can it truly be said that carrying the "stamp of one defect," she did "in the general censure take corruption from that particular fault" (I.iv.35-36).

The critics are agreed that Gertrude was not a party to the late King's murder and indeed knew nothing of it, a point which on the clear evidence of the play, is indisputable. They have also discussed whether or not Gertrude, guilty of more than an "o'er-hasty marriage," had committed adultery with Claudius before her husband's death. I will return to this point later on. Beyond discussing these two points, those critics who have dealt specifically with the Queen have traditionally seen her as well-meaning but shallow and feminine, in the pejorative sense of the word: incapable of any sustained rational process, superficial and flighty. It is this tradition which a closer reading of the play will show to be erroneous.

Professor Bradley describes the traditional Gertrude thus:

The Queen was not a bad-hearted woman, not at all the woman to think little of murder. But she had a soft animal nature and was very dull and very shallow. She loved to be happy, like a sheep in the sun, and to do her justice, it pleased her to see others happy, like more sheep in the sun... It was pleasant to sit upon her throne and see smiling faces around her, and foolish and unkind in Hamlet to persist in grieving for his father instead of marrying Ophelia and making everything comfortable... The belief at the bottom of her heart was that the world is a place constructed simply that people may be happy in it in a good-humored sensual fashion.

Later on, Bradley says of her that when affliction comes to her "the good in her nature struggles to the surface through the heavy mass of sloth."

Granville-Barker is not quite so extreme. Shakespeare, he says,

gives us in Gertrude the woman who does not mature, who clings to her youth and all that belongs to it, whose charm will not change but at last fade and wither; a pretty creature, as we see her, desperately refusing to grow old... She is drawn for us with unemphatic strokes, and she has but a passive part in the play's action. She moves throughout in Claudius's shadow; he holds her as he won her, by the witchcraft of his wit.

Elsewhere Granville-Barker says "Gertrude who will certainly never see forty-five again, might better be'old.'[That is, portrayed by an older, mature actress.] But that would make her relations with Claudius—and
their likelihood is vital to the play—quite incredible” (p. 226). Granville-Barker is saying here that a woman about forty-five years of age cannot feel any sexual passion nor arouse it. This is one of the mistakes which lie at the heart of the misunderstanding about Gertrude.

Professor Dover Wilson sees Gertrude as more forceful than either of these two critics will admit, but even he finds the Ghost's unwillingness to shock her with knowledge of his murder to be one of the basic motivations of the play, and he says of her "Gertrude is always hoping for the best." 

Now whether Claudius won Gertrude before or after her husband's death, it was certainly not, as Granville-Barker implies, with "the witchcraft of his wit" alone. Granville-Barker would have us believe that Claudius won her simply by the force of his persuasive tongue. "It is plain," he writes, that the Queen "does little except echo his [Claudius'] wishes; sometimes—as in the welcome to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern—she repeats his very words" (p. 227), though Wilson must admit later that Gertrude does not tell Claudius everything. Without dwelling here on the psychology of the Ghost, or the greater burden borne by the Elizabethan words "witchcraft" and "wit," we can plainly see, for the Ghost tells us, how Claudius won the Queen: the Ghost considers his brother to be garbage, and "lust," the Ghost says, "will sate itself in a celestial bed and prey on garbage" (I.v.54-55). "Lust"—in a woman of forty-five or more—is the key word here. Bradley, Granville-Barker, and to a lesser extent Professor Dover Wilson, misunderstand Gertrude largely because they are unable to see lust, the desire for sexual relations, as the passion, in the Elizabethan sense of the word, the flaw, the weakness which drives Gertrude to an incestuous marriage, appalls her son, and keeps him from the throne. Unable to explain her marriage to Claudius as the act of any but a weak-minded vacillating woman, they fail to see Gertrude for the strongminded, intelligent, succinct, and, apart from this passion, sensible woman that she is.

To understand Gertrude properly, it is only necessary to examine the lines Shakespeare has chosen for her to say. She is, except for her description of Ophelia's death, concise and pithy in speech, with a talent for seeing the essence of every situation presented before her eyes. If she is not profound, she is certainly never silly. We first hear her asking Hamlet to stop wearing black, to stop walking about with his eyes downcast, and to realize that death is an inevitable part of life. She is, in short, asking him not to give way to the passion of grief, a passion of whose force and dangers the Elizabethans are aware, as Miss Campbell has shown. 

Claudius echoes her with a well-reasoned argument against grief which was, in its philosophy if not in its language, a piece of commonplace Elizabethan lore. After Claudius' speech, Gertrude asks Hamlet to remain in Denmark, where he is rightly loved. Her speeches have been short, however warm and loving, and conciseness of statement is not the mark of a dull and shallow woman.

We next hear her, as Queen and gracious hostess, welcoming Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to the court, hoping, with the King, that they may cheer Hamlet and discover what is depressing him. Claudius then tells Gertrude, when they are alone, that Polonius believes he knows what is upsetting Hamlet. The Queen answers:

I doubt it is no other than the main,
His father's death and our o'er-hasty marriage.

(II.ii.56-57)

This statement is concise, remarkably to the point, and not a little courageous. It is not the statement of a dull, slothful woman who can only echo her husband's words. Next, Polonius enters with his most unbrief apothecary to brevity. The Queen interrupts him with five words: "More matter with less art" (II.ii.95). It would be difficult to find a phrase more applicable to Polonius. When this gentleman, in no way deterred from his loquacity, after purveying the startling news that he has a daughter, begins to read a letter, the Queen asks pointedly "Came this from Hamlet to her?" (II.ii.114).
We see Gertrude next in Act III, asking Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, with her usual directness, if Hamlet received them well, and if they were able to tempt him to any pastime. But before leaving the room, she stops for a word of kindness to Ophelia. It is a humane gesture, for she is unwilling to leave Ophelia, the unhappy tool of the King and Polonius, without some kindly and intelligent appreciation of her help:

And for your part, Ophelia, I do wish
That your good beauties be the happy cause
Of Hamlet's wildness. So shall I hope your virtues
Will bring him to his wonted way again,
To both your honors.

(III.i.38-42)

It is difficult to see in this speech, as Bradley apparently does, the gushing shallow wish of a sentimental woman that class distinctions shall not stand in the way of true love.

At the play, the Queen asks Hamlet to sit near her. She is clearly trying to make him feel he has a place in the court of Denmark. She does not speak again until Hamlet asks her how she likes the play. "The lady doth protest too much, methinks" (III.ii.240) is her immortal comment on the player queen. The scene gives her four more words: when Claudius leaps to his feet, she asks "How fares my Lord?" (III.ii.278).

I will for the moment pass over the scene in the Queen's closet, to follow her quickly through the remainder of the play. After the closet scene, the Queen comes to speak to Claudius. She tells him, as Hamlet has asked her to, that he, Hamlet, is mad, and has killed Polonius. She adds, however, that he now weeps for what he has done. She does not wish Claudius to know what she now knows, how wild and fearsome Hamlet has become. Later, she does not wish to see Ophelia, but hearing how distracted she is, consents. When Laertes bursts in ready to attack Claudius, she immediately steps between Claudius and Laertes to protect the King, and tells Laertes it is not Claudius who has killed his father. Laertes will of course soon learn this, but it is Gertrude who manages to tell him before he can do any meaningless damage. She leaves Laertes and the King together, and then returns to tell Laertes that his sister is drowned. She gives her news directly, realizing that suspense will increase the pain of it, but this is the one time in the play when her usual pointed conciseness would be the mark neither of intelligence nor kindness, and so, gently, and at some length, she tells Laertes of his sister's death, giving him time to recover from the shock of grief, and to absorb the meaning of her words. At Ophelia's funeral the Queen scatters flowers over the grave:

Sweets to the sweet; farewell!
I hop'd thou shouldst have been my Hamlet's wife.

I thought thy bride-bed to have deck'd, sweet maid,
And not t'have strew'd thy grave.

(V.i.266-269)

She is the only one present decently mourning the death of someone young, and not heated in the fire of some personal passion.

At the match between Hamlet and Laertes, the Queen believes that Hamlet is out of training, but glad to see him at some sport, she gives him her handkerchief to wipe his brow, and drinks to his success. The drink is poisoned and she dies. But before she dies she does not waste time on vituperation; she warns Hamlet that the drink is poisoned to prevent his drinking it. They are her last words. Those critics who have thought her stupid admire her death; they call it uncharacteristic.
In Act III, when Hamlet goes to his mother in her closet his nerves are pitched at the very height of tension; he is on the edge of hysteria. The possibility of murdering his mother has in fact entered his mind, and he has just met and refused an opportunity to kill Claudius. His mother, meanwhile, waiting for him, has told Polonius not to fear for her, but she knows when she sees Hamlet that he may be violently mad. Hamlet quips with her, insults her, tells her he wishes she were not his mother, and when she, still retaining dignity, attempts to end the interview, Hamlet seizes her and she cries for help. The important thing to note is that the Queen's cry "Thou wilt not murder me" (III.iv.21) is not foolish. She has seen from Hamlet's demeanor that he is capable of murder, as indeed in the next instant he proves himself to be.

We next learn from the Queen's startled "As kill a king" (III.iv.30) that she has no knowledge of the murder, though of course this is only confirmation here of what we already know. Then the Queen asks Hamlet why he is so hysterical:

> What have I done, that thou dar'st wag thy tongue
> In noise so rude against me?

(III.iv.39-40)

Hamlet tells her: it is her lust, the need of sexual passion, which has driven her from the arms and memory of her husband to the incomparably cruder charms of his brother. He cries out that she has not even the excuse of youth for her lust:

> O Shame! where is thy blush? Rebellious hell,
> If thou canst mutine in a matron's bones,
> To flaming youth let virtue be as wax
> And melt in her own fire. Proclaim no shame
> When the compulsive ardor gives the charge,
> Since frost itself as actively doth burn,
> And reason panders will.

(III.iv.82-87)

This is not only a lust, but a lust which throws out of joint all the structure of human morality and relationships. And the Queen admits it. If there is one quality that has characterized, and will characterize, every speech of Gertrude's in the play, it is the ability to see reality clearly, and to express it. This talent is not lost when turned upon herself:

> O Hamlet, speak no more!
> Thou turn'st mine eyes into my very soul,
> And there I see such black and grained spots
> As will not leave their tinct.

(III.iv.88-91)

She knows that lust has driven her, that this is her sin, and she admits it. Not that she wishes to linger in the contemplation of her sin. No more, she cries, no more. And then the Ghost appears to Hamlet. The Queen thinks him mad again—as well she might—but she promises Hamlet that she will not betray him—and she does not.

Where, in all that we have seen of Gertrude, is there the picture of "a soft animal nature, very dull and very shallow"? She may indeed be "animal" in the sense of "lustful." But it does not follow that because she wishes
to continue a life of sexual experience, her brain is soft or her wit unperceptive.

Some critics, having accepted Gertrude as a weak and vacillating woman, see no reason to suppose that she did not fall victim to Claudius' charms before the death of her husband and commit adultery with him. These critics, Professor Bradley among them (p. 166), claim that the elder Hamlet clearly tells his son that Gertrude has committed adultery with Claudius in the speech beginning "Ay that incestuous, that adulterate beast" (I.v.4Iff). Professor Dover Wilson presents the argument:

Is the Ghost speaking here of the o'er-hasty marriage of Claudius and Gertrude? Assuredly not. His "certain term" is drawing rapidly to an end, and he is already beginning to "scent the morning air." Hamlet knew of the marriage, and his whole soul was filled with nausea at the thought of the speedy hasting to "incestuous sheets." Why then should the Ghost waste precious moments in telling Hamlet what he was fully cognisant of before? . . . Moreover, though the word "incestuous" was applicable to the marriage, the rest of the passage is entirely inapplicable to it. Expressions like "witchcraft", "traitorous gifts", "seduce", "shameful lust", and "seeming virtuous" may be noted in passing. But the rest of the quotation leaves no doubt upon the matter.

(p. 293)

Professor Dover Wilson and other critics have accepted the Ghost's word "adulterate" in its modern meaning. The Elizabethan word "adultery," however, was not restricted to its modern meaning, but was used to define any sexual relationship which could be called unchaste, including of course an incestuous one. Certainly the elder Hamlet considered the marriage of Claudius and Gertrude to be unchaste and unseemly, and while his use of the word "adulterate" indicates his very strong feelings about the marriage, it would not to an Elizabethan audience necessarily mean that he believed Gertrude to have been false to him before his death. It is important to notice, too, that the Ghost does not apply the term "adulterate" to Gertrude, and he may well have considered the term a just description of Claudius' entire sexual life.

But even if the Ghost used the word "adulterate" in full awareness of its modern restricted meaning, it is not necessary to assume on the basis of this single speech (and it is the only shadow of evidence we have for such a conclusion) that Gertrude was unfaithful to him while he lived. It is quite probable that the elder Hamlet still considered himself married to Gertrude, and he is moreover revolted that her lust for him ("why she would hang on him as if increase of appetite had grown by what it fed on") should have so easily transferred itself to another. This is why he uses the expressions "seduce," "shameful lust," and others. Professor Dover Wilson has himself said "Hamlet knew of the marriage, and his whole soul was filled with nausea at the thought of the speedy hasting to incestuous sheets"; the soul of the elder Hamlet was undoubtedly filled with nausea too, and this could well explain his using such strong language, as well as his taking the time to mention the matter at all. It is not necessary to consider Gertrude an adulteress to account for the speech of the Ghost.

Gertrude's lust was, of course, more important to the plot than we may at first perceive. Charlton Lewis, among others, has shown how Shakespeare kept many of the facts of the plots from which he borrowed without maintaining the structures which explained them. In the original Believerest story, Gertrude (substituting Shakespeare's more familiar names) was daughter of the king; to become king, it was necessary to marry her. The elder Hamlet, in marrying Gertrude, ousted Claudius from the throne. Shakespeare retained the shell of this in his play. When she no longer has a husband, the form of election would be followed to declare the next king, in this case undoubtedly her son Hamlet. By marrying Gertrude, Claudius "popp'd in between th'election and my hopes" (V.ii.65), that is, kept young Hamlet from the throne. Gertrude's flaw of lust made Claudius' ambition possible, for without taking advantage of the Queen's desire still to be married, he could not have been king.
But Gertrude, if she is lustful, is also intelligent, penetrating, and gifted with a remarkable talent for concise and pithy speech. In all the play, the person whose language hers most closely resembles is Horation. "Sweets to the sweet," she has said at Ophelia's grave. "Good night sweet prince," Horatio says at the end. They are neither of them dull, or shallow, or slothful, though one of them is passion's slave.

Notes


Andrew Gurr (essay date 1978)


[In the following essay, Gurr examines Claudius's role in the play, stating that Claudius initiates every action in the play, except for the deaths of Polonius and Ophelia. In terms of Hamlet's political plot, Gurr argues that it is Claudius's story, "the narrative of his struggle to maintain order and security in the state. . . ."]

Based on an ostensible realism as the play is, the first subject to study, the framework of the action, is the Claudian world, the official, public world where appearances belie reality, and from which consequently Hamlet feels alienated. We begin with the court at Elsinore.

Shakespeare was always careful with his anachronisms. In the political background to his Elsinore story he carefully specifies the historical details and makes it clear that he is doing so. Any anachronisms in his presentation are at risk more from our misreading than his casualness. On the question of succession to the Danish throne for instance, where too many editors have assumed that hereditary succession by primogeniture, the automatic inheritance through the eldest son, was the norm, Shakespeare is careful to describe it as elective. A much older form in Europe than primogeniture, formalised by Charlemagne, election of kings by a council of elders was the standard procedure across medieval Europe, and certainly the normal practice in the ninth or tenth-century Denmark of the historical Amleth. Automatic succession by the eldest son did not replace election in England until 1272, in France in 1270, and later still in the less powerfully nationalistic territories such as Denmark.

One of the advantages of election was that it gave scope for the crowning of any eligible member of the royal dynasty if for any reason the heir apparent was unfit. A brother could rule if the eldest son was still a child, or a younger son if the eldest was an idiot. Normally, the eldest son could expect to be elected, but not automatically. He was truly the "apparent" heir to the throne. The system had its problems, since an elected brother might well promote the claims of his own child ahead of the dead king's infant son, and the in-fighting
where an infant or imbecile heir did exist was usually fatal to someone. Five and more centuries of such struggles led in the end to a general preference for the automatic succession of the eldest son, whoever and whatever he might be, and consequently the elevation of primogeniture to the status of a law of nature, a law assumed to be ordained by God for the regulation of all mankind.

Looking back from an age which had found its kings through primogeniture with some degree of success for three hundred years, sixteenth-century writers were conscious of the hazards of the older system. Shakespeare dealt with the hazards of primogeniture in nine history plays. Election offered opportunities for even more mayhem of the kind exemplified in the Amleth story. It had the advantage for this play of clearing out of the way any direct concern for title, the problem handled so extensively in the history plays. Hamlet's problem is personal, not dynastic. His mayhem does not come from a struggle for power. Shakespeare used anachronisms in Denmark, but not over the Danish constitution.

The details of Denmark's elective system are touched on in obliquely but fully. We are first given a hint in the parallel case of Norway, which also settled on its kings by election. At I.1.80-104 Horatio tells the story of the wager between the now-dead King Hamlet of Denmark and his opposite, old Fortinbras of Norway, and how young Fortinbras wants to regain the lands lost when his father was killed by old Hamlet. Not for another hundred lines, till I.ii.28-30, do we learn (and then in passing) that the new king of Norway is not young Fortinbras but the dead king's brother, "uncle of young Fortinbras". The parallel between Denmark and Norway is thus made clear. We know the Danish situation by now since Claudius began his speech from the throne with a reference to "Hamlet our dear brother's death".

Several niceties of the election system are touched on in the same scene. Claudius emphasises at the beginning of his opening speech that both his accession to the throne and his marriage were approved by the council. "Nor have we herein barred / Your better wisdoms, which have freely gone / With this affair along." Again, when he addresses the dead king's son as "our cousin Hamlet and my son", he is taking care to claim a closer kinship than young Fortinbras has to his uncle the king of Norway. By marrying the queen Claudius has avoided the problem of choice between the dead king's heir and any children of his own. He confirms this implication of his marriage a few lines later when he explicitly announces that young Hamlet is his choice as the next king.

You are the most immediate to our throne . . .

Our chiefest courtier, cousin, and our son.

This is the "pledge" to which he announces he will drink that night. He has made as decisive an announcement as Hamlet's own at the end of the play when he declares that Fortinbras "has my dying voice" in the election of a new king (V.ii.338). That the king's pledge has been registered is confirmed when Rosencrantz reminds Hamlet that "you have the voice of the king himself for your succession in Denmark" (III.ii.318-9). With the king's own vote in his pocket Hamlet's election is as nearly guaranteed as any question of power can be. The same pledge leads Laertes and Polonius in the next scene to warn Ophelia that Hamlet is a prince out of her star.

Claudius's pledge has far-reaching consequences. Laertes says Ophelia has to reject Hamlet's love because it can only be lust. Marriage is out of the question because Hamlet's consort will be chosen by the advice and consent of his council—"circumscribed / Unto the voice and yielding of that body / Whereof he is the head." In his choice of human flesh, says the gentle brother, Hamlet being royal may not "Carve for himself." How exalted and guarded Hamlet must be as heir apparent is constantly implied, when the queen calls him "our hope" (II.ii.24) or when Claudius sensibly comments "Madness in great ones must not unwatched go" (III.i.187). And yet the question of the succession is open enough for Claudius to offer it to Laertes and for the mob to riot on his behalf.
The rabble call him lord;
And, as the world were now but to begin,
Antiquity forgot, custom not known,

The ratifiers and props of every word,
They cry, 'Choose we; Laertes shall be king!'

(IV.v.98-102)

Custom demands that the council elect him, not the mob. But no custom, even the custom of carousing to his pledge, will hold Claudius to his vote for Hamlet if expediency makes it convenient to offer it to Laertes instead.

Election runs continually in Hamlet's mind. He calls Horatio his soul's "elected" friend (III.ii.60), and his thwarted ambition is one of the three charges he puts up against Claudius, the only one he feels free to declare publicly. In the closet scene to Gertrude he calls Claudius a cutpurse who has stolen the crown. To Ophelia he describes himself—a public and not undissembling statement—as "very proud, revengeful, ambitious" (III.i.125). Rosencrantz in his clumsy attempt to pick up Hamlet's thinking had already used the last word (II.ii.249). Hamlet even does him the convenience of returning it to him (III.ii.317) in reply to a direct question over the cause of his "distemper". Saying he lacks advancement is what he knows his audience expects him to say. But election is in his mind, and there is an element of truth in the admission. In V.ii.65, when he rehearses the list of Claudius's crimes to Horatio, he makes the point explicitly and unambiguously. Claudius has not only "killed my king and whored my mother" and plotted against Hamlet's own life, but has "Popp'd in between th’election and my hopes".

Hamlet's hopes were not only hopes of power for himself. Even before he learns of the murder Claudius committed to gain the throne he is bitter about the new king. In the first soliloquy after he has seen Claudius at his smooth work Hamlet's comparison of dead king to living king carries with it the assumption that Claudius degrades the throne, that there is an honour in the post, an ideal of conduct to which Hamlet himself aspires and which is out of Claudius's reach.

My father's brother, but no more like my father
Than I to Hercules!

(I.ii. 152-3)

Hamlet is disgusted with the Claudian world well before he knows it to be a criminal one. Between the Hamlet world and the Claudian world there is an unbridgeable gulf; they are alternative societies.

The Claudian world is a practical one, and within its own terms markedly more successful than the Hamlet world in maintaining law and order, peace and prosperity in the land. Claudius fights with superb skill and resolution for the security of his "state", a word which encompasses his prosperity, his throne, and his kingdom. Like his travesty Polonius Claudius uses the cunning of age against the rashness of youth. All the threats, a balanced group of challenges, come from the younger generation. Young Fortinbras threatens invasion from abroad; young Laertes threatens rebellion from within; and beyond both of these public dangers is young Hamlet, a secret cause of insecurity both to the king's title and his life. A king who poisons people through their ears manages to defeat two of the threats, the external and the internal, with mere words; he even turns them to his own advantage. Throughout the play Claudius acts with speed and sureness to avert every risk, in a masterly display of political skill. His only failures are in his first plot against Hamlet's life once the threat comes into the open, and in the excess of cunning which this failure draws him on to, what you might call his overkill, in the final scene. At the very end, too, his loyal courtiers do not come when he calls on them.
for help against Hamlet. He is more alone then than Hamlet himself.

The details of Claudius's manoeuvres are sketched in lightly but fully, and the skeleton of the plot can be seen in them. Claudius initiates every action in the play except the murder of Polonius and Ophelia's suicide. We can trace the whole sequence of events through Claudius.

The first detail is the guarded battlements and preparations for war. Sentries, two of whom we meet at the opening of the play, are on constant watch; armourers and ship-builders are working overtime (their "sore task/ Does not divide the Sunday from the week"). The defences are alert because young Fortinbras is planning to invade Denmark, unknown to his old uncle the king of Norway, to regain lands his father lost to Hamlet's father. A thoroughly serious threat against which Claudius is making serious defensive preparations.

In the scene of the king in council which immediately follows, however, we find him doing more than passively wait for the invasion. The first item on the agenda after the formal words about his predecessor and his marriage is an announcement that the threat of invasion is to be met by sending ambassadors to warn the Norwegian king of his nephew's plan, in the hope that old Norway will honour the agreement over Denmark's annexation of the land and so prevent Fortinbras from trying to regain it. Claudius is in total command of the situation. He trusts himself to assess the danger accurately and to judge the best action to take. He keeps a firm grip on events—the ambassadors are to deliver his written message to the Norwegian king and no more. Eventually of course (in II.ii) we shall hear that his judgement was right and that the stratagem has succeeded. The invasion is stopped without bloodshed and at minimal cost to Denmark.

The next two items on the council's agenda at this first meeting (I.ii) are seemingly trivial domestic matters. They do however have a bearing on state security too, and Claudius well knows it. The first item is Laertes' request for permission to return to the high life of Paris after his dutiful attendance at the funeral and wedding festivities, which Claudius readily grants him. The Claudian world approves of courtly training in Paris as it does of deep drinking at Elsinore. The second item is Claudius's refusal of permission for Hamlet to return to his studies at Wittenberg. Diplomatically he gives the reason that Hamlet is important to the state as the nominated successor to Claudius. This piece of candy he injects with the tart suggestion that as heir apparent Hamlet really ought to learn to behave better and dress more normally. When Hamlet's response is insultingly to ignore Claudius and reply only to his mother Claudius chooses to gloss it over ("tis a loving and a fair reply"). He has got his way in the important matter, that of keeping Hamlet where he can be watched. And he has put Hamlet in the wrong simply by displaying his own tact and discretion in contrast with Hamlet's surly offensiveness. Hamlet's attitude is anything but the "gentle and unforced accord" which Claudius chooses to call it, as everyone at court can witness, to Hamlet's shame. Only Hamlet sees the iron hand behind the smooth reproof. Denmark's a prison, he tells Rosencrantz later.

Claudius's final words to his council are image-builders too. He is hearty, carousing, carefree. "No jocund health that Denmark drinks today, / But the great cannon to the clouds shall tell, / And the king's rouse the heaven shall bruit again." Not for him the lean and hungry look. He is richly dressed (a peacock Hamlet calls him), and a hearty drinker who can dissemble enough to poison other people with it when need be.

Not that Hamlet, out of step as ever, is above accusing Claudius of thrift ("The funeral baked meats / Did coldly furnish forth the marriage tables" I.ii. 179-80). That is a mark of Claudius's inversion of values, like the drinking, which Hamlet also condemns at I.ii. 174 and I.iv.8-22. Claudius's choice of drink as a concealment for his mental sharpness, his disguise for the solitude that the possession of power entails, leads Hamlet into his "mole of nature" speech, about men who suffer condemnation in general for one vice in particular. Since that is not at all Claudius's situation, Hamlet's criticism says more about his antipathy to Claudius, his rejection of the king's way of making himself seem human, than it does of Claudius's standing in the community at large. In outward appearances Claudius wins hands down. His behaviour is impeccable, his policy sound and economical, his handling of an ungracious and hostile stepson discreet and effective.
Claudius next appears in Act 2, after Hamlet has learned the ghost's story and has resorted to his "antic" (clowning) disposition as his own form of image building. Claudius, ever cautious and alert to possible dangers, won't take what he calls this "transformation" at face value and has fetched two of Hamlet's "school fellows", fellow-students from Wittenberg, to spy on him and find what lies behind his strange behaviour. He is sceptical of Polonius's conjecture that Hamlet is merely love-sick, but agrees to test it as an additional line of investigation. The ambassadors have returned from Norway with Fortinbras's invasion successfully scotched, so Claudius is free to turn his full attention to what is clearly developing as the next threat to state security.

Hamlet of course has no trouble baffling both his fellow students and Polonius, so that early in Act 3, when Claudius gets their reports on what they have found he can see that they will never get anywhere. Consequently after he has himself spied on Hamlet's antic behaviour to Ophelia his conclusions are properly cautious, and his decision prompt.

Love! His affections do not that way tend;
Nor what he spake, though it lacked form a little,
Was not like madness. There's something in his soul
O'er which his melancholy sits on brood;
And I do doubt the hatch and the disclose
Will be some danger; which for to prevent,
I have in quick determination
Thus set it down: he shall with speed to England,
For the demand of our neglected tribute.

(III.i.161-69)

Such a mission is proper for a prince. Moreover a sea voyage, he tells Polonius, might help to clear that distracted head. But the Mousetrap, Hamlet's essay at spying, is waiting for Claudius, and when it snaps shut Claudius sees that the egg Hamlet is sitting broodily on (164-5) does indeed contain something dangerous. Before it can hatch therefore Hamlet must be sent away. Claudius is ahead of Hamlet here too. Even before Hamlet has finished his turn at spying Claudius has shifted from suspicion to action, in a prompt and sensible reversal of his earlier decision to keep Hamlet at court where he could be watched. In Ill.iii Claudius, quickly back in control after the "distemper" which Hamlet's Mousetrap play put him in, orders Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to escort him overseas on the grounds that his lunacy and his closeness to the royal family puts the throne in danger.

The terms of our estate may not endure
Hazard so near us as doth hourly grow
Out of his lunacies.

(III.iii.5-7)

A thoroughly reasonable precaution. Unfortunately Claudius's helpers are less prompt than he is. Polonius is still intent on spying, and worse still Gertrude has roused herself to take an initiative. Stirred to action for the first time on seeing the way her son used the Mousetrap to provoke her new husband, she decides to speak to him, to tell him off as if he were an illbehaved child. When he replies with very unchildlike violence, and holds her in her seat to listen to his sharp words, she remembers the violence of lunatics and shrieks for help, with results fatal to her would-be helper behind the curtain, who is also too frightened to do anything but stay where he is and cry for help. On hearing of this catastrophe Claudius, fresh from his attempt to repent his brother's murder, decides that his stepson must be destroyed to prevent more trouble.
Polonius's death is a potential disaster which Claudius can easily turn to his own advantage. He can hold Hamlet prisoner (in the Kozintsev film Hamlet was put in a strait-jacket) till he is safely on board ship for England, and even has a potential excuse for making sure that Hamlet never returns alive. To Gertrude he can explain shipping him off as getting him out of the way till the uproar over the "vile deed" has blown over. He has to do something because he will in any case be blamed for failing to keep mad Hamlet where he could do no harm, and by sending him away he might be able to escape the slanders which would be bound to grow if he did nothing to check his errant son and heir.

In IV.vii, moreover, Claudius admits a further difficulty, that besides the problem of upsetting his doting mother Hamlet's popularity with the people makes it difficult to "put the strong law on him". So to Hamlet and the immediate court he announces that the reason for sending Hamlet overseas is for Hamlet's own safety. His soliloquy announcing the secret reason, that Hamlet is to be killed while away, follows immediately. We can take it, presumably, that Claudius has inserted this further twist of policy into the original plan as a result of Hamlet's murder of Polonius, though it might equally well be a result of the Mousetrap's revelation that Hamlet knows about his father's murder. I think we should take it that after the Mousetrap at first Claudius is genuinely penitent, and that only the ominously short work Hamlet makes of Polonius, a surrogate for the king, pushes him into the decision to kill him. Expediency forces him into more and more devious turns as the pressure of Hamlet's threat to his security mounts.

Turning Polonius's murder to his advantage in this way is adroit enough, but there are other troublesome consequences of the deed, in Polonius's orphaned children, which call for even more speedy footwork. The furtive burial of the corpse was necessary to keep the queen believing in her husband's desire to protect Hamlet, but it causes problems with both children. Ophelia's madness is obviously Hamlet's fault, another item in his crime sheet, but the burial does make it seem that Claudius is protecting Hamlet. It is therefore some sort of pretext for Laertes to raise his rebellion on. "We have done but greenly, / In hugger-mugger to inter him" (IV.v.79-80), admits Claudius. He already knows of Laertes'return and the rumour-mongering which is stirring up a general suspicion against him as king: "necessity, of matter beggared, / Will nothing stick our person to arraign / In ear and ear" (IV.v.88-90). There is evidently popular support for Hamlet's invidious comparison of Hyperion-Hamlet to his satyr-brother. Claudius does not command the universal respect his brother had.

But Claudius is a man for all occasions. Just as he stopped the invasion by Fortinbras with a word in old Norway's ear, so now he stops Laertes'insurrection with words, and turns one enemy against another by diverting Laertes'passion against Hamlet. Claudius is at his best in the scenes with Laertes because we know for the first time exactly what he has to cope with and see him doing it. He is cool, steady, ripe with the native hue of resolution, a perfect actor of a part he knows to perfection. Supremely disingenuous, reminding Gertrude in passing that her son is "most violent author / Of his own just remove", he uses her when Laertes bursts in as a foil to his own brave stand. He draws Laertes from violence into an exchange of words, and once on his own ground sets to work to adjust him from a blind to a precisely aimed hatred.

That I am guiltless of your father's death . . .
It shall as level to your judgement'pear
As day does to the eye.

(IV.v.146-9)

He knows perfectly what the outward appearance of events will show.

Make choice of whom your wisest friends you will,
And they shall hear and judge'twixt you and me,
a judgement he gives a price to by putting his crown and life on it. His plan is clear: "Where th'offence is let the great axe fall". Laertes will learn that Claudius is already in the process of executing justice on Hamlet.

That of course can't happen in Gertrude's hearing, and only in IV.vii, once the judgement has been passed in Claudius's favour and Gertrude is absent, can Claudius describe the details of the execution. He explains that he hasn't punished Hamlet openly because the queen is so devoted to him and because of his general popularity, "the great love the general gender bear him". But Laertes may be satisfied.

You must not think
That we are made of stuff so flat and dull

That we can let our beard be shook with danger
And think it pastime.

The Mousetrap play, danger in pastime, evidently still rankles. And then just as Claudius is on the point of telling Laertes his plot to kill Hamlet comes the news of the prince's return. On hearing that calamity Claudius changes direction without a tremor. He wisely omits to tell Laertes that he's already tried to kill Hamlet once and has failed, and within a few seconds is offering Laertes the chance to do it himself with a new scheme which he ironically claims is "ripe in my device". Once again it has to be devious, to appease both Hamlet's partisans and his enemies.

. . . for his death no wind of blame shall breathe;
But even his mother shall uncharge the practice,
And call it accident.

So, resourceful as ever, Claudius manoeuvres Laertes into position with that implausible account of Hamlet's jealousy over Laertes'reputation as a swordsman. Italianate poisons are added to the French notion of a duel (Claudius evidently has less faith in Laertes'swordsmanship than he lets Laertes know), and the plan for Laertes'revenge is ready.

The two contrasting scenes about death, Ophelia's suicide and the gravedigging scene, hold us off until the plan is ready to be set in motion. When Hamlet and Laertes fortuitously meet at the graveside and fight, Claudius tells both Laertes and Gertrude to have "patience", for opposite reasons. Still playing the game both ways, Claudius says confidently to Gertrude when they learn of Ophelia's suicide that he'd only just managed to cool Laertes down, and that the news would set him on his path of revenge again.

That note, the ambiguous voice of the seemingly wellmeaning diplomat, sounds again at the outset of the duel when Claudius, having laid his fatherly bet on Hamlet, makes the contestants shake hands and declare a truce to animosity. Even in the scuffle when the poisoned foil cuts both of them he pretends peacemaking—"Part them. They are incensed." To the very end he keeps up his act. When Gertrude collapses poisoned by the drug meant for Hamlet he desperately declares "She swoons to see them bleed." But finally, when Laertes gasps out the truth and Hamlet swoops to his revenge, he is alone. His plea for help—"O, yet defend me, friends; I am but hurt"—goes unheeded. Words at last will not serve. They have substituted for general popularity only for so long as Claudius has remained conspicuously in control. Now, as his most complicated plot begins to go astray and strew more bodies on the stage, an action at last begins which only Claudius himself, face to face with Hamlet at last, can play. The final action belongs to the two most solitary figures alone.

This is the story of what happens in the play at its political, Claudian level. Claudius is an efficient king, supremely competent at handling challenges to his state, external and internal alike. He is just in the routine performance of his rule, commanding the loyalty of the old king's chief counsellor and the allegiance of the court. There is no illegality in his being elected ahead of young Hamlet to the crown of Denmark; he cannot
be challenged as an usurper. Marrying the former king's widow was useful to secure his position, but it is also obviously a love match of sorts on both sides, whether or not we take the ghost's allegation of adultery to mean a liaison preceding the murder. The only intractable problem in the way of a peaceful and prosperous rule is young Hamlet. And how childishly he behaves. Sulky, and solitary, he refuses to cast off his mourning clothes when the new king decrees that the proper period is over. He seems to enjoy the public contrast of his own gloomy black with the celebratory colours and deep-drinking of the court. He won't even concede the semblance of good manners towards the king, in spite of a promise that the king will give his support to Hamlet's succession. Openly hostile and ambitious in the eyes of the court, he becomes when afflicted by seeming insanity openly threatening. He insults the tender Ophelia as readily as he insults the king his stepfather. He assaults his mother and murders the chief counsellor of the state. He treats the corpse of his victim shamefully and shows little sign of penitence for his deed. He fights with the murdered man's son in the grave of the daughter, a tender girl driven to suicide by Hamlet's acts against her and her father. He insults even the seemingly well meaning Osric. He is utterly at odds with the court and his position in it. He is the only discordant note in the well orchestrated Claudian world.

That, very roughly, is the sequence of political actions in the story of *Hamlet*. It is Claudius's story, the narrative of his struggle to maintain order and security in the state for which, as king, he has total responsibility. Kings kept order and administered justice, and in return their subjects owed obedience. Hamlet's disobedience ended in the total destruction of the royal family and dynasty, and the family of Denmark's chief counsellor. On almost every count it is a story of political disaster caused by Hamlet alone.

Political collapse is what happens in the play on the Claudian level. Above it though is Hamlet's level, the region where all the major structural parallels and contrasts combine to focus attention not on Claudius as the centre of political events but on Hamlet. In the pattern of political challenges to state security Hamlet is in the centre, Laertes and Fortinbras on either flank, Claudius the target for all three, for reasons which emphasise the solitary eminence of Hamlet's perspective against the merely expedient calculations of all the others.

The parallels of Fortinbras and Laertes to Hamlet are precise, each one taking up a different aspect of Hamlet's situation. Young Fortinbras is in the same position in Norway as Hamlet is in Denmark, the king his father and namesake dead, his father's brother on the throne. Laertes is in the same position as Hamlet, too, in having a father killed, his murderer unpunished and a target for the son's revenge. The two unthinking men of action, "outstretched heroes", flank the doubt-ridden student prince who shares their problems but not their psychology.

A more complex set of parallels and contrasts putting Hamlet above Claudius can be found in the two triangular patterns already mentioned. The first, old King Hamlet, his murderer Claudius and his queen, is explicitly made by young Hamlet to match its successor, King Claudius, murdering Hamlet and the queen, by means of two groupings of literary figures, King Priam—revenging Pyrrhus—Hecuba, and Player King—Lucianus—Player Queen. This matching of roles is a complex exercise. It links Hamlet and Claudius as regicides, and so makes a love triangle (husband, wife, lover) into a political issue. It puts Hamlet into Claudius's shoes as criminal murderer, regicide, and in some sense a rival for Gertrude's affections. Where the obvious value of the Laertes—Fortinbras—Hamlet parallels lies in the emphasis they give to Hamlet's inert suffering of his shame and his ultimate triumph, the two triangular patterns put his task of revengeful murder into deeper focus. Brother Claudius has murdered King Hamlet and married the queen out of political ambition and earthly love. Nephew Hamlet must murder King Claudius and yet not destroy the queen with grief. His dilemma is the moral one in the act of revenge, the difficulty of punishing an evil act without committing an exactly parallel act.

Hamlet's first literary analogy to this problem is the old account of Priam's murder by fell revenging Pyrrhus, who hesitates before his sword falls as he hears the walls of Troy collapse around him but still sets Hecuba to her grief and the narrator to his tears. In this first analogy to his situation Hamlet is more concerned to incite
himself with revenging Pyrrhus's example than to dwell on the grief of Hecuba. She of course laments the
death of old Priam as Gertrude so conspicuously did not for old Hamlet: a noble Trojan precedent for ignoble
Denmark. But will Gertrude weep this time, when revenging Hamlet drops his sword on the old head of
Claudius?

In his soliloquy following the speech about Troy Hamlet checks himself for such a self-indulgent use of
literary precedents, and sets about preparing a better analogy for his situation. The analogy he sets up, his
Mousetrap, the murder of Gonzago, follows the ghost's account of King Hamlet's murder by Claudius in all its
details, including the thirty years marriage, except one. Hamlet gleefully points out to the increasingly worried
Claudius as the Mousetrap unfolds, that the Player King's murderer is "one Lucianus, nephew to the King".
Just as brother Claudius had been positioned in the triangle as rival and murderer of King Hamlet, so now
nephew Hamlet will position himself in the new triangle as murderer of King Claudius. Even to the extent of
winning the queen's love from the king.

Hamlet's problem over this last point is neatly illuminated in a third analogy when, on the point of visiting
Gertrude after the Mousetrap, Hamlet tells himself he will not have the heart of a Nero. This, the reason
Shakespeare changed the name Fengon from his sources into Claudius, is an allusion to Tacitus's view that the
Emperor Claudius in marrying Nero's mother Agrippina was committing incest. He was her uncle. And of
course Nero murdered not Claudius but Agrippina.

The two sets of triangular relationships and their historical analogies are patterns making it clear that Hamlet
son must emulate his uncle's sin in avenging his father's death. It has the neatness of an eye-for-an-eye justice.
It is the pattern Hamlet father expects his son to follow as unquestioningly as Fortinbras and Laertes follow
their revenges. And as before what stands in the way of direct accomplishment, of a precise parallelism, is
Hamlet's mind, his better consciousness of the implications of the larger pattern of things.

A trio of young men all aim their revenges against Claudius and the security of his state. Young Fortinbras is
after Claudius to avenge his father's loss and the territory which went with it. Young Laertes is ready to
overturn the throne for its murky involvement in the cover-up of his father's murder. Claudius turns both aside
from their vengeance, Fortinbras into a futile "fantasy and trick of fame" as Hamlet calls it, the classic method
of taking out one's frustration on a secondary target, and Laertes is diverted into serving the king. Laertes for
his pains is sickened by what he has to do so much that he loses his desire for revenge altogether and asks his
victim to "exchange forgiveness with me". Fortinbras for his acquiescence gains a kingdom.

Between these two casual slaughterers stands Hamlet, more powerfully impelled to murder (by three offences
to Laertes'one), pushed by the ghost where Fortinbras and Laertes struggle only for their notional honour. All
the structural analogues, the triangles and the parallelisms, draw our attention firmly to Hamlet's mental
problem and indicate some of the complexities of his situation. Unlike his peers he pauses. Like rugged
Pyrrhus he hears Troy falling. He hesitates over obstacles where Laertes and Fortinbras see only a clear road.
He diverts his passion onto secondary targets as he sorts out the tangle of morality and psychology in which
he is caught. The whole interim of Hamlet's delay between the order to take revenge and its execution is the
central matter of the play.

Notes


Martha C. Ronk (essay date 1994)

In the following essay, Ronk examines the way in which Ophelia is represented first as a projection of other characters, and then the way she is represented by Gertrude, when the queen describes Ophelia's drowning.

Ophelia has perhaps been drawn or painted more frequently than any of Shakespeare's heroines; yet her history of representation not only postdates the play's production, but also is embedded in the play itself. Ophelia seems to move towards the abstract or emblematic throughout as she is represented as dutiful daughter, beloved beauty, mad woman, drowned innocent. Early in the play she is represented as the projection of others—her father and brother and Hamlet who set aside her statements about herself and revise her into obedience. Polonius further instructs her in representing herself as what she is not, telling her to stifle her desires for and her faith in Hamlet and to present herself to him as indifferent and pious maid as he simultaneously represents her as the devil: "with devotion's visage/ And pious action we do sugar o'er/ The devil himself (III.i.47-49). Hamlet draws attention to Ophelia as a false picture by referring to the use of cosmetics as painting: "I have heard of your paintings, well enough. God hath given you one face, and you make yourselves another" (III.i.144 ff.) Hamlet most frequently juxtaposes miniatures of his father and Claudius, but he also gazes on Ophelia as if he meant to draw a picture of her. Ophelia gives a picture of his picturing her:

He took me by the wrist and held me hard.
Then goes he to the length of all his arm,
And with his other hand thus o'er his brow
He falls to such perusal of my face
As a would draw it.

(II.i.87-91)

Once she is mad, Claudius speaks of "poor Ophelia/ Divided from herself and her fair judgment,/ Without the which we are pictures or mere beasts" (IV.v.83-5, my emphasis). Once Ophelia has lost those who created her (Polonius is dead and Laertes is absent), she is undone. Her representation as the conventional mad woman derives directly from patriarchal law, and her mad songs foreground the twisted manner in which she speaks her concerns with sexuality and death. In spite of its conventionality, however, her representation as madwoman does accomplish something other than pathos. For one, at the moment in which she is presented as most divided, she is also most aware of the exploitation of maids, and of the ways in which romantic myths of St. Valentine's day become crude losses. Moreover, without any physical contact, she has moved beyond maidenhood—not not virginal, but something else. She demonstrates her knowledge of the equivocal nature of things by puns—Hamlet's device as well—("by Cock"), and by singing her grotesqueries prettily. As Laertes says: "Thought and affliction, passion, hell itself./ She turns to favor and to prettiness" (IV.v. 186-87).

The most arresting and arrested picture of Ophelia occurs after she has disappeared from the play in Gertrude's description of her drowning in IV.vii. 166-83, and it is this representation which I take as the focus of my paper. This is a peculiar speech for at least two reasons. One, for what it is not. It is not a lamentation or disjointed outpouring of emotion as might be expected; rather it is a set piece, an arras, a speaking picture. It seems contrived and overblown. Gertrude's stylized speech is notably attentive, not to the human tragedy at its center, but to the decorative aspects of Ophelia's drowning—the embroidered flowers, the slanting willow, the billowing skirts. At the very least one might find it curious that the queen should give so aesthetically pleasing and detailed a description of the event:

Her clothes spread wide,
And mermaid-like awhile they bore her up,
Which time she chanted snatches of old lauds,
As one incapable of her own distress,
Or like a creature native and indued
Unto that element. But long it could not be
Till that her garments, heavy with their drink,
Pull'd the poor wretch from her melodious lay
To muddy death.

(IV.vii.174-183)

Secondly, the speech is peculiar, if not outrightly bizarre, because Gertrude appears to have been present as eyewitness. For if she had been present to watch Ophelia's sinking to "muddy death," the speech puts Gertrude again in the situation of being complicitous with someone's dying. Moreover, since it is so highly astute a representation of Ophelia—of her madness, sexual obsessions, confused motivations—one wonders how Gertrude knows so much and just how much Gertrude's Ophelia is a mirror of herself and a premonition of her own death. Since it is so visual a representation, one wonders what is it a visual representation of; what is it (to refer to the language of Othello) ocular proof of? How does the picture function in terms of representing "Ophelia" and what does the representation itself say about representing the unseeable? The question of who saw what and what such seeing means is, of course, central to the entire play.

In this paper I focus on Shakespeare's use of ekphrasis to signal a representation of the inexpressible, the speaking picture, the refiguration of what cannot be figured. That is, I focus on ekphrasis as a particular means of suggesting aspects of character not otherwise accessible. In Jakobson's terms the relationship between word and image is both metonymic and metaphoric—metonymic in that the two complete each other sequentially and as parts of a whole, metaphoric in that each translates into the other's medium. Each moves towards the other impossibly. By moving from one sign system to another the poet creates a gap to signal a gap and it is in this arena that I locate my discussion of Ophelia—not to argue that Shakespeare has miraculously been able to represent the unrepresentable, but that the technical shift from verbal to visual by means of a specific rhetorical device, ekphrasis, signals both the enormous gap between words and images (and between images and the world) and the suggestion that the missing sign system might indeed offer up some version of "presence." Moreover, since the picture of Ophelia is given by means of language, the speech conveys ocular absence in an especially potent manner—no paint, no body.

Such shifts into the ekphrastic occur in Shakespeare's plays in numerous places: Viola's Patience speech, Cleopatra on the barge, Desdemona's willow song, to name a few. In the case of Viola, the Patience speech functions in a variety of complex ways, but especially to assert—while simultaneously denying—her other gender by evoking the picture of her sister. The case of Ophelia is complicated since she does not present her own picture, but rather has it presented "for her" by Gertrude. Yet like the famous "speaking pictures" discussed at length by Renaissance rhetoricians, Ophelia's picture does assert something about an issue central to the play—acting and its relationship to volition. By setting the speech on Ophelia's drowning in the context of the visual—both in terms of rhetoric (ekphrasis and enargeia) and culture (popular sixteenth century emblem books, theatrical staging)—I will try to suggest what her representation represents. I choose this manner of examining Ophelia in order to use the methodology of the period, but I also think that the shifts into ekphrasis in Shakespeare's plays stand at significant junctures and demonstrate the successes and failures of representation. Further, I will follow the lead of Angus Fletcher's work on allegory in drawing together two critical methods which have traditionally been at odds with one another: the discussion of Elizabethan imagery and psychoanalytic interpretations of the plays.

I don't wish to argue that there is a transhistorical self or transcendent essence of Ophelia, but that Shakespeare frequently devises an approach to such by means of technical devices. That is, he uses visual allegory, for example, to extend and expand representation of character. Rather than making a character less elastic, I would argue, such artificial devices work to deny one aspect of character in service of something else. Rather than flattening character, such devices fill in what we know more traditionally by means of plot and dialogue. If the subject is missing—and clearly a picture of someone absent and in the process of dying in
her absence is about as far from subject as one can get—what appears in its place and to what ends?

The representation of Ophelia has been almost entirely iconic; her wild hair depicts madness or the victim of rape; her blank white dress stands in contrast to Hamlet's inky and scholarly black; the emblematic flowers which she gives away and which surround her at death signal her participation in deflowering; her snatches of song suggest fragmentation of character. For Hamlet she is emblem of mother, bride, and finally grave. In her fine article, "Representing Ophelia: women, madness, and the responsibilities of feminist criticism," Elaine Showalter shows how historical depictions of Ophelia alter with changes in attitudes towards women and madness. I wish to argue, however, that her picture-like existence in the play raises epistemological questions as well. As Bridget Lyons suggests in her essay on the iconography of Ophelia as flower-giver, although Ophelia exhibits certain traditional props and gestures of the goddess Flora, she nonetheless remains difficult to read. Within the play itself her iconography is contradictory as she appears both as the goddess of nature and a debased version of the same. Significantly, Ophelia herself draws attention to the difficulties of signs and their meanings when she comments that the flowers she hands about can carry a variety of meanings:

There's rue for you; and here's some for me. We may call it herb of grace a Sundays. O, you must wear your rue with a difference.

(IV.V.178 ff.)

That is, in her language and in her person Ophelia most vividly raises questions of the ways by which we know things and of the confusion that may result from using different approaches or different sorts of language. Most pointedly, Ophelia provokes questions of character, questions also posed by the ghost which comes "in the same figure like the King that's dead." Both "figures" raise the questions: what is a theatrical representation of character; what is the relationship between a figurative and a dramatic character; what is the relationship of what one sees to what is; can a "piece" of a character ("a piece of him")—whether that piece is a bit of dialogue, a bit of ghostly shadow, a bit of mad talk—represent a full blown "character," and what does that mean? Interestingly, both Ophelia and the ghost are uncannily half-dead, seen and not seen (mad, ghostly) and are potent in their absence. The ghost who is there and not there sets Hamlet on his quest for revenge and Ophelia, more powerful in death than in life, propels Hamlet to declare his love, his "identity" ("This is I, Hamlet the Dane") and his willingness, finally, to fight. Both raise the question of what meaning is to be assigned to a figure (or figures of speech or emblematic figures) and what relationship exists between a so-called figure and any other sort of reality. The ghost appears "as Hamlet Sr." and from the outset of the play questions what it means to appear "as" something else, especially in a play in which one figure is constantly being substituted for another, one representation of father for another, one woman for another. Here Ophelia appears as an emblem of Ophelia, but not in order to be dismissed, but rather to mean differently from the ways she has meant before. Angus Fletcher points to these fundamental questions concerning what is usually called the lack of reality of allegorical characters in his book on Allegory: "allegorical agents are real enough, however ideal their referents may be, however unlike ourselves they may appear. They have what might be called an adequate representational power." Too many philosophic questions are raised: What constitutes reality? Is it accuracy of representation? Then what constitutes accuracy? Or representation?" (32).

In her final moments of the play Ophelia is caught in an allegorical picture, one that most readers and viewers cannot forget. If Hamlet threatens to become all language and eventually all story, Ophelia as his counterpart becomes all picture, displayed in her final moments by means of description, not so much even of her person but of the objects around her, as if they could speak her story:

There is a willow grows aslant the brook,
That shows his hoar leaves in the glassy stream
Therewith fantastic garlands did she make
Of crowflowers, nettles, daisies, and long purples,
That liberal shepherds give a grosser name,
But our cold maids do dead men's fingers call them.
There on the pendent boughs her crownet weeds
Clamb'ring to hang, an envious sliver broke,
When down her weedy trophies and herself
Fell in the weeping brook.

(IV.vii.166-75)

The willow—here given (like Ophelia) not directly but by means of a representative reflection—is itself an emblem described by Thomas Fuller in his *The History of the Worthies of England*: "A sad Tree, whereof such who have lost their love make their mourning garlands" (144). The rest of the items in the description are emblematic as well. The nettles are associated with pain, poison or betrayal; the daisies with forsaken love. The crow-flowers perhaps symbolize dejection; the phallic purples signal the causal association between sexuality and death; the flowers are transformed to trophies.

The scene is rendered even more allegorical by personification: the branch on which Ophelia climbs is "envious" and the brook into which she falls is "weeping." "Weeping" comes at the end of a chain of sounds that seems to build inevitably to this conclusion—"weeds," "weedy," "weeping." The court may be corrupt and the queen may be dry-eyed, but the pathetic fallacy is in place. Gertrude says that Ophelia is in harmony with nature (*indued unto that element*) and the sounds draw all the items of the scene, both human and inhuman, closer together so that weeping becomes a generalized event with many participants: Ophelia, brook, Gertrude, audience. Although the human figures are not described as actually weeping, the unrealized state of mourning for each is pictured in the weeping brook. As in other allegorical moments, emotion, often unconscious emotion, is spread out over the landscape. We know the centrality of mourning then through this scene. Since, as Lacan argues, there has been too little mourning heretofore, finally there is enough (39).

I would argue that in allegorical writing such as this, the unconscious is, to borrow Louis Aragon's phrase, "out there." Ophelia may be missing in the sense that we know little of her except as others describe her, but like the hoar leaves, she is reflected/captured piecemeal in the embroidery of the scene. The willow tells us of Ophelia's unrequited love and the fantastic garlands (circular garlands on a phallic bough) tell of her obsession with sexuality and death. Allegory heightens the pervasiveness of sorrow and makes the connection between world and character inescapable. In discussing Virgil's use of a night scene to describe Dido's sorrow, the Renaissance critic Peacham reiterates this argument, including the effect of pictorial description on the reader. As Rosemond Tuve observes: "[It] offers a way of magnifying the depth and importance of Dido's sorrow. Our participation in that passion, made thus more active, operates to give us a more familiar insight into all sorrow, for, as Sidney says, it is so in [its] own naturall seate layd to the viewe, that wee seeme not to heare of [it], but cleerely to see through [it]'" (165-66). The mechanical operation set up by pictorial allegory leads to an assumption of depth and importance. That is, the technique of "seeing through" leads to an assumption of "seeing through and into and beyond." If there has been an enormous identification with Ophelia over the years since the first production of *Hamlet*, it may have to do not only with how much of her story is missing from the play (and therefore how many gaps there are for the imagination to fill), but also with a visual operation established by scenes such as this.

Though this particular scene is rich in allegorical detail, it is not an isolated example of Shakespeare's use of emblems in the play. The play's display of emblems is full, if not indeed extreme: Yorick's skull, the graveyard, the figure of the ghost, the mousetrap—all visual images in the service of abstraction. Moreover, the play belongs to an historical period in which the emblematic was a received mode of perceiving the world. Rosemary Freeman draws attention to an habitual cast of mind for Renaissance poets, a readiness to see a
relation between simple, concrete, visible things and moral ideas (155); Steven Mullaney describes London, particularly the liminal space of the Liberties as highly emblematic: "Reading the city . . . was something every citizen was expected to do" (14). Masques were emblematic; Spenser's "Shepheards Calender" was emblematic; designs for tapestry or for the queen's gowns were taken from emblem books; certain Shakespearean characters are seen as emblems—Falstaff as Vice or Actaeon. Critics have often thought that emblem books provide the closest model to these ekphrastic moments in Shakespeare's plays. First published in England in 1586, such books also present pictures in combination with text—set apart, interpreted, allegorized—each part necessary, each part not enough. Renaissance writers repeatedly express enthusiasm for emblem books and for vivid pictures. Sidney, for example, argues that a philosopher is not so accomplished as a poet since he can only create "a wordish description, which doth neither strike, pierce, nor possess the sight of the soul so much as that other doth." Sidney also draws attention to the power of *uit pictura poesis* and *enargeia* (similar to *ekphrasis*) not so much to narrate as to exhibit. Like the figures in emblem books, many of which are classical women, Ophelia seems in her death to be held up as a statue or visual exhibit designed to be contemplated and interpreted.\(^1\)

Although discussion of the pervasiveness of the pictorial in Renaissance literature is beyond the scope of my paper, I want to allude at least to the importance of the visual in the theater. The theater, of course, is always a focal point of the interplay between the visual and the verbal and *Hamlet* almost relentlessly replaces one with the other, most obviously in the mousetrap scenes, but also throughout. The play persistently replaces itself in the way it refigures its own progress, drawing self-conscious attention to the incompleteness of each figuring. Thus my understanding of the two representations of the murder is that one (the dumbshow) simply does not work: Claudius doesn't respond, not for some commonsensical reason as that he is engaged in conversation, but because the effect of representation (as Hamlet notes in his conversations with the players) is mysterious and uncertain in its effects. Likewise, the picture of Ophelia drowning localizes the point of connection between the verbal and the visual and draws attention to the inconclusiveness of both. Too much and too little are given. What does it mean? What are the allegorical implications? And what is there in this "passive" portrait and useless drowning which seems rather to suggest potency?

The nature of the speech is, as I have said, a set speech, a formal and artificial picture in part because of its numerous emblematic qualities. Moreover, to move from the speech itself to the speaker, it appears set because it is narrated in so flat and decorative a manner that one might assume a painting (traditionally commissioned to keep one's image alive after death) rather than a tragic event were being described. Gertrude describes the event as if it were a scene to be contemplated in careful detail rather than a scene to be reacted to; she doesn't lose control or break from her cool chronology of events. One might say that the speech no more belongs to Gertrude than to anyone; it is outside of character as if it stood at a remove and had its own integrity and purpose. It must occur when it does because it introduces the graveyard scene, but it could, one might argue, be projected from any voice or any character. Does it matter, then, that it is Gertrude who utters these words?

I think that it matters for several reasons. First, Gertrude is the other woman in the play subject to the decisions, the sexuality, the plotting of men; here she substitutes for Ophelia. By speaking of Ophelia, Gertrude speaks—as she rarely does in the play and here only by reflection—of herself. Like Ophelia who dutifully obeys father and brother, Gertrude is submissive to Claudius, behaving as a sort of projection. In their first encounter with Hamlet, Claudius asks "how the clouds still hang on you," and Gertrude echoes "good Hamlet, cast thy nighted colour off." Both women are reflected in the eyes of the men around them: Hamlet would draw Ophelia and would, as he says in the closet scene, set up a glass for Gertrude to see her "inmost part." Both women are attacked by Hamlet for their whorishness and both are torn by conflicting loyalties, slipping from one allegiance to another, and losing the ability to represent themselves. Ophelia's gathering of "long purples," for example, seems an enactment not so much of her own fantasies, but of Hamlet's. The dank image of "dead men's fingers" to describe these same flowers may reveal her ambivalence towards sexuality, but it seems equally evocative of Hamlet's injunction to Gertrude concerning
Claudius' fingers. Equivocally, he tells her not to do what he bids her do, and specifically pictures the king "paddling in your neck with his damn'd fingers" (III.iv.187). In Shakespeare, visual descriptions seem not so much particular as pervasive, not so much belonging to a single character's unconscious as to an unconscious underlying the play as a whole. Yet for all of Hamlet's crazed objectifying of both Ophelia and Gertrude, it is Gertrude who gives the last description of Ophelia as an art object. This seems appropriate, not only because of their comparable positions, but also because Gertrude's dispassionate description forces an audience to attend to what is happening to them both. Just as she disappears from the play, Ophelia becomes emblem or icon in a process eerily similar to that of others of Shakespeare's women characters. As Ophelia becomes icon, Gertrude as witness forces the self-conscious witnessing of her/their fetishization.

Gertrude's description is thus striking because of her decided aesthetic objectification of Ophelia. For Gertrude, Ophelia is a site of fascination and obsessive staring; there is no intimacy between them, as there is, for example, between Rosalind and Celia; and nothing, moreover, that draws Gertrude towards maternal intimacy or concern. Although later she does say that she had hoped to deck her marriage bed with flowers, a comment that indicates some connection to the girl who might have married her son, here she simply describes Ophelia as if she were invitingly framed to be stared at. It seems to me, then, that one of the reasons this moment is so unsettling is that vis à vis Ophelia, Gertrude stands in what is so frequently in these plays a male position, or at least one that renders her a distant and voyeuristic observer.

Yet, unbeknownst to her, Gertrude's delivery of this speech also binds her inextricably with Ophelia—calling attention to how they have each been made. Moreover, it binds her to Ophelia by so fully capturing the way in which both Ophelia and Gertrude decide by not deciding, intend by not intending. Gertrude seems not to know of Hamlet Sr.'s murder, yet she does suffer guilt for some reason as she indicates by an aside just before Ophelia enters singing her mad songs:

To my sick soul, as sin's true nature is,
Each toy seems prologue to some great amiss.
So full of artless jealousy is guilt,
It spills itself in fearing to be spilt.

(IV.v.17-20)

Her comment about the player queen—"The lady doth protest too much"—seems also to give some indication if not of guilt, then of her subtle knowledge of how to represent oneself in a complex, shady world.

What then does this knowledge indicate that she knows about the man she marries and about his murdering of Hamlet Sr.? Ophelia also seems "to act" in some shadowy realm of knowing and not knowing. She seems to crawl out the limb merely to hang her garland of flowers for some nonchalant, aesthetic reason, yet she is already mad, already obsessed with the death of her father. Is she out of control or not, and what does control mean at this juncture in the play? Is she, like Hamlet, acting a part or acting, and what is the difference between them, a question the play and the players reiterate time and again. This is the sort of serious quibble which the clowns turn comic in the graveyard: if Ophelia went to the water she drowned herself purposely; but if the water came to her, then she drowned herself in her own defense.

I am leading here to the question of whether or not Gertrude is complicitous in the murder of Hamlet Sr., not that I think that the play offers a direct answer, but rather that the play so insistently raises the question of what it means not to know what is going on. Ophelia, as many have argued, does not deserve the maimed rites which she receives because she did not intend to commit suicide; rather she crawled out on a weak limb to hang her trophy of flowers and the branch broke. Yet, although she is cleared of suicide, she still receives maimed rites. Although the moment at which Gertrude chooses to marry Claudius is missing from the play, the scene in which Ophelia agrees to stand as bait for Hamlet is not. I have often puzzled over this scene.
wondering if it were a moment of change in which she gives up even the few worried questions she poses for her father early in the play, questions which signal her fullness as character, to become a pure iconic image of devotion. In this moment does the representation of Ophelia shift so that she is no longer allied with life but with a kind of stasis, life-in-death? In describing Ophelia's inadvertent death does Gertrude in some way describe the inadvertency at the center of her own actions; in her description of another does she acknowledge her complicitous choices even as Ophelia seems to choose suicide? By this speech does Gertrude portend her own death in which "the drink" also pulls her down. Does she, like Hamlet, sense what is to come or does she speak more wisely than she knows when she says to Laertes just before her description of Ophelia's drowning, "One woe doth tread upon another's heel,/ So fast they follow" (IV.vii. 162-63)?

In the play as a whole happenstance looms large and when accident occurs it seems to signal the operation at least of fate if not, as Hamlet suggests, of providence. Gertrude accidentally drinks from the wrong cup; Ophelia dies by the accidental breaking of a branch; and Hamlet's ship encounters the pirates by chance. Behind these events there seems to be some hidden meaning which the picture of the breaking branch contains. In visual terms such a picture appears analogous to Hamlet's: "There is 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." That is, the picture of the breaking branch contains the past, present and future, as Gertrude pictures Ophelia making a garland, crawling out on the branch, and falling to her death; and it focuses on volition and on fate—on being ready or even eager to die and on leaving it, simultaneously, to fate. It seems as if Ophelia must hang up the garland—must, even to the point of drowning. Her compulsion to hang out this garland, this circular O of flowers on the limb seems to engage with Hamlet's copulatory imagery throughout the play and also to be an enactment of a ritual of mourning. As she says in her mad song about her father: "Larded with sweet flowers / Which bewept to the grave did not go" (IV.v.38-9). Thus Ophelia out on a limb is emblematic of an intertwining of choice and fate that tragically can only be represented in numerous ways, never untangled. It is an emblem of the equivocation—acting and not acting—which stands at the center of the play, and of the equivocal nature of representation.

In more psychological terms, it is emblematic of Ophelia's absolute control of her actions and simultaneously of her total submission to an obsessive idea which possesses her. Ophelia is driven compulsively to hang out the garland or to hand out flowers in a proper and ordered fashion. Ophelia's allegorical behavior becomes analogous, as Fletcher argues, to compulsive behavior: "The commonest experience of the compulsive neurotic is that he is suddenly disturbed by impulses that have no apparent rational meaning, and thence are seen as arbitrary and external commands" (287). And yet, Ophelia's action is powerful for all its seeming strangeness (or, as Fletcher puts it, "foreignness"), in part I think because that which is missing from view is enacted in the visual emblem as she, like Hamlet in his final scene, enacts both sexes in one: she is both bough and garland as he is both sword and wound. Also, it is a moment in which art dominates and asserts its power: the random flowers of the mad scene have been braided into a garland which outlines the O of Ophelia's name. Copulation has become entirely symbolic.

The description of Ophelia's drowning adds momentously to her representation just as she is permanently removed from the play. Just as the play seems to stall just before the rush of events leading to Hamlet's death, so here it stops as Gertrude leisurely relates the drowning. Indeed, the ekphrastic moment is a moment of stop time, as Murray Krieger has so well described, a moment when stillness reigns; this is particularly obvious here since it comes at the end of the scene in which Laertes and Claudius are plotting Hamlet's death and in which Laertes expresses all eagerness for action. Ekphrasis and enargeia run counter to narrative time and seem to move into space as a escape from time and its effects as in the famous example of the Grecian Urn. Ekphrasis allows for a kind of spacing out, a shift into another mode. In Hamlet Ophelia is clearly affronted by the rapid passage of time—by the early loss of young love, by the unexpected murder of her father, by the loss of her own sanity, and finally by death. Moreover, Ophelia is effaced not only by the rapid pace of time, but also by the language of nothingness, the nothing, as Hamlet remarks, between maids'legs (III.ii.115-19). In this instance the nothingness becomes so overwhelmingly sexual as to blot out any other aspects of character.
The play's counter-movement to this rapid effacement of Ophelia is the presentation of her as abstract allegorical figure, most particularly in the moment of her drowning in which she paradoxically becomes one with the earth (dragged "to muddy death"). She is now the obvious representation of "Ophelia," or to put it another way, that she was a representation all along is made clear. The picture disrupts any notion of "self by turning "self into pure figuration. Uncannily, Ophelia seems to participate in this movement, answering Hamlet's version of her nothingness with her own, and replacing her earlier frenzied madness with another sort: still, calm, deliberate. Her movement out on the limb is as Murray Krieger describes it in his essay on ekphrasis, "a forever-now" motion (118). It has often seemed to me appropriate in a comic way that the foolish Polonius is killed behind an arras. As a character he is marked by mechanical behavior, two-dimensional as a tapestry. Ophelia also is defined in the play by mechanical operations foisted on her largely by her father, and her death scene is also tapestry-like. Yet, I would argue that the effect on the reader of this move from drama to the still ekphrastic moment is to elicit contemplation—in particular concerning the successes and failures of representation, the losses and triumphs of becoming picture or story. Both Renaissance and contemporary literary critics are sensitive to the peculiar effect of allegorical representation. Peacham says that the figure of allegory "engraves" the image of things "under deep shadowes to the contemplation of the mind." Angus Fletcher suggests that emblems and allegory present codes to be deciphered which elicit, therefore, an interpretive response from the audience: "the silences in allegory mean as much as the filled-in spaces, because by bridging the silent gaps between oddly unrelated images we reach the sunken understructure of thought" (107). Thus one's experience of this madness, if it is that, is quite different from one's experience of Ophelia's earlier mad scene. Quieted by emblem, one's experience is of something beyond.

This movement into eternal icon thus renders Ophelia paradoxically outside of or beyond the very mutability which death usually entails. Such a technical maneuver places her in a new arena as amplified figure: an artificial representation larger than life. Michel Beau-jour argues persuasively that ekphrasis is disruptive of the forward movement of narrative time and that it operates towards the ideal:

Such rhetorical ornaments as enargia, ekphrasis, the whole complex array of evidentia, lie athwart the thread of narrative time, and jeopardize its integrity. Like the imagines agentes of Memoria, descriptive figures derive their energy from idealization, excess, hyperbole, cosmic order. Reaching for optimum effectiveness, descriptive ornaments rise toward an Empyrean inhabited by quasi-Platonic ideas and, as such, they become strangers to mutability, and to the red dust of cause and effect. (42)

As Gertrude slowly details the drowning, Ophelia moves out of narrative and into some "cosmic order," as fantastical as the fantastic garlands she weaves. She becomes part of a pastoral world removed from the corruption of the court; even the liberal shepherds' "grosser name" for the long purples seems merely frank compared to the sexual license and incest at court. She belongs to the artificial realm of pastoral poems:

Therewith fantastic garlands did she make
Of crow-flowers, nettles, daisies, and long purples,
That liberal shepherds give a grosser name.

(IV.vii.167-69)

Another way in which the picture of Ophelia specifically argues for Ophelia as an inhabitant now of another realm is in the peculiar imagery used to describe her clothes: "her clothes spread wide,/ And mermaid-like awhile they bore her up." The image "mermaid-like" for Ophelia's skirts is so far-fetched as to force one to ask why such an image occurs. Like mermaids her clothes bear her up, bear her away. Indeed she seems metamorphosed into a water creature of sorts: "like a creature native and indued/ Unto that element," she seems therefore oblivious of drowning. She is, like the mermaids, a momentary inhabitant of two realms, air
and water. Some part of her, alien and otherworldly, has split off in the form of skirts, to buoy her up. Paradoxically, at the moment of her death in the play, she is on her way to becoming legendary, the stuff that does not change.

By association, I would argue, Ophelia herself comes to be represented by mermaids. Like the mermaid, Ophelia is split in nature by those who describe her in the play; in Gertrude's speech that split is displayed in the vivid picture of creatures half-women and half-fish buoying Ophelia in the water. As emblems mermaids were readily available to the culture and had been part of the pageants given to entertain Queen Elizabeth at Kenilworth in 1591 and at Elvetham in 1595, creating a sort of Ovidian myth for the Elizabethan age. In *Midsummer Night's Dream* Oberon tells about such a mythical realm in which mermaids calm the seas and sing heavenly music:

I sat upon a promontory,
And heard a mermaid, on a dolphin's back,
Uttering such dulcet and harmonious breath,
That the rude sea grew civil at her song,
And certain stars shot madly from their spheres,
To hear the sea maid's music.

(II.i. 150-56)

In *Hamlet* Shakespeare's imagery of mermaids mythologizes Ophelia, pulling her into an iconic realm of the idealized and transcendent.

The figure of Ophelia behaves allegorically then in pointing insistently beyond itself as a key to something hidden, mysterious, unexpressable, a realm—to use Walter Benjamin's terms—"of hidden knowledge." In allegory, he argues, "all of the things which are used to signify derive, from the very fact of their pointing to something else, a power which makes them appear no longer commensurable with profane things, which raises them onto a higher plane, and which can, indeed sanctify them" (175). The shift into *ekphrasis* may not be able fully to render that realm, but it is a potent technical device which can suggest the larger and inexpressible shift. That is, *ekphrasis* becomes a poetic device to render a presence which cannot be rendered or to represent that which cannot be represented. If the word is the sign for symbolic and arbitrary mediation, the image becomes a sign for the unmediated. As W. J. T. Mitchell suggests in *Iconology*:

We imagine the gulf between words and images to be as wide as the one between words and things, between (in the largest sense) culture and nature. The image is the sign that pretends not to be a sign, masquerading as (or, for the believer, actually achieving) natural immediacy and presence. The word is its "other," the artificial, arbitrary production of human will that disrupts natural presence by introducing unnatural elements into the world—time, consciousness, history, and the alienating intervention of symbolic mediation.

(43)

What interests me at this point is what to make of the emblem which is "Ophelia." Although it seems true that Shakespeare's women cannot survive their transformations into art objects, it seems also true that some potency remains in this portrait of Ophelia in part because of some specific aspects of this particular scene such as the witty enactment of copulation which it is tempting to see as some form of transcendent sexuality, insistently beyond the forms offered by the culture of the play. Even the reference to the mermaids seems to draw attention to two sexes in one; if the scene is a scene of symbolic copulation, it is one in which *gentle, diffuse, and spread out* (like the skirts) seem the operative terms. I also would postulate at least tentatively that when we approach the women of Shakespeare's plays as art objects or as objects of the gaze, we come at them
in part, and particularly in the second example, from a modern perspective. Although I do not deny the frequent obliteration of women in the plays, it would be more useful to imagine what sort of potency resides with an icon from the perspective of the sixteenth-century Protestant Reformation which repressed icons, particularly icons of the central female figure of the Catholic Church. From this vantage, the emblem of Ophelia appears more subversive and potent; as the figure who represents the return of the repressed, she is eerily insistent and tropic.

Moreover, Ophelia seems to participate in her own emblematization. She moves beyond the play at this point to stand in a realm apart like the mimes or the silent ghost. In this tragedy, Hamlet's and Ophelia's refusal to participate in the world as it presents itself results in death. Yet Ophelia's death also has a sort of insistent calm about it, constructed by the technical devices of narration and ekphrasis. I do not mean to overly romanticize silence, but I do mean to draw attention to the potency of refusal.

Further, the emblem, again like the ghost, has a potency associated with the arousing of fear. As many critics have pointed out, this play is very much one of questions concerning where one comes from and where one goes and the fear attendant on such questions. Significantly, then, Ophelia may be said to arouse fear first as an image of the other, that is, woman (for Hamlet, an image of the debased sexuality of his mother), and here imaged as half-woman, half-fish; and secondly as emblem of where one comes from and where one is going (to muddy death). More importantly, perhaps, the ekphrastic portrait of Ophelia arouses fear as the form of emblem itself. This is a version of Freud's "uncanny" in which one feels an eerie fear when one "doubts whether an apparently animate being is really alive; or conversely, whether a lifeless object might not in fact be animate."¹⁸ W. T. J. Mitchell explains the fear of ekphrastic moments in a manner in keeping with Freud as stemming from a sense of the visual image as a sort of idol or fetish: "the fear stems from the recognition that these signs, and the others who believe in them, may be in the process of taking power, appropriating voice" (151). Such fear could arise from a dead person speaking as the ghost speaks to Hamlet or as Ophelia "speaks" from beyond the grave.

She makes herself known ekphrastically by putting forth emblematic flowers—at least so Laertes imagines:

    Lay her I'th'earth,
    And from her fair and unpolluted flesh
    May violets spring.

(V.i.233-34)

The grotesque nature of this image becomes even more evident when it is set next to Shakespeare's source in Persius: "e tumulo fortunataque favilla/ nascentur violae?"¹⁹ The violets in Shakespeare's play grow not out of the ground, but out of Ophelia's very flesh, and are emblems here of the realm beyond the human: fair and unpolluted.

As a sort of decomposing emblem which passes in and out of the iconic, Ophelia forces a recognition of all that such alternation back and forth signifies, including the realms beyond the senses, realms located in absence and death; and, more importantly, of the uncanny and affecting nature of that which will not hold still even in its stillest (most iconic) form. As Ophelia shifts in and out of the iconic, her shifts represent the mysterious absences and gaps which are contained in the "not this" of "that" or the "not that" of "this." She remains unseen. Indeed how could Gertrude have seen her, many critics of the play have asked, the sort of naive question like "how many children had Lady Macbeth?" that leads us to central perceptions concerning male potency (a central issue in Macbeth) or concerning unrepresentativity, to my mind, the central issue in Hamlet. That is, the Gertrude who has been represented in the play could not have witnessed and then narrated Ophelia's drowning; that she appears "other" at this point further underscores the instability of representation. That Gertrude describes Ophelia as "incapable of her own distress" signals not only Ophelia's removal from
self (by madness perhaps), but also her incapability, as in sonnet 113: "Incapable of more, replete with you./ My most true mind thus maketh mine m'eyen untrue." As Stephen Booth has it in his notes to the sonnets, "the capsulation of everything in the poem has logically distinguished in the course of reporting a fanciful collapse in distinctions of function." Vision undoes vision. In discussing Shakespeare, many critics have described his use of doubles and substitutes and replays; here is another sort of doubling: the use of ekphrasis to represent and underscore the O which is missing. One is blocked from seeing, thwarted in one's efforts to pierce the narrative to see the picture which itself blocks "Ophelia." Neil Hertz associates "blockage" with the sublime, describing the activity of a mind attempting to match the extent of an object: "but when its capacity matches the extent of the object, the sense of containing the object, but also (with a hint of the theological paradox) of being filled by it, possessed by it, blocks the mind's further movement and composes it into a solemn sedateness, 'strikes it with deep silent wonder.'" Ophelia's ekphrastic presence in the play, particularly given the historical moment, suggests the impossibility of more than seeing what the viewer "could not have seen" (as Hamlet can never see his own conception and his own death) to an audience intent on viewing what is not there—the sheer impossible effort of which may also help to create a sense of the transcendent or of the frustration which lapses into it.

Notes


2 Irigaray: "How could she be anything but suggestible and hysterical when her sexual instincts have been castrated, her sexual feelings, representatives, and representations forbidden" (Speculum of the Other Woman, trans. Gillian Gill, [Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985], 59-60).


6 The definitions for figure in the OED are too numerous to include in full here. I give some of the ones relevant to my argument: "5a. An embodied (human) form; a person considered with regard to visible form or appearance. 9a. The image, likeness, or representation of something material or immaterial. 1531 Elyot Gov. I. xxvi, There is not a more playne figure of idlenesse, than playinge at dise. 10. esp. An artificial representation of the human form. b. In painting, drawing, etc. H.a. Represented character; part enacted; hence, position, capacity. 1610 Shakes. Temp. III.ii i 83 Brauely the figure of this Harpie, hast thou Perform'd. 12. An emblem, type."

7 I am grateful to my colleague Michael Near of Occidental College for these perceptions.

8 Thomas Fuller, The History of the Worthies of England (London: F.G.W.L. and W.G., 1662). See also the Longer Notes in Jenkins, 544-47. Alciatus pictures a willow in plate 201 in a way that associates the willow not with unrequited love, but with sexuality, if not assault: "A willow tree near a stream. . . . At the left a nude supine woman with a burning torch at her side. Behind the woman a kneeling bearded man reaching between the legs of a second nude woman who leans back on her knees" (Emblemata [Padua, 1621]).

Concerning terminology, Jean Hagstrum provides important information about current use of the term: "I use the noun *ekphrasis* and the adjective *ekphrastic* in a more limited sense to refer to that special quality of giving voice and language to the otherwise mute art object. My usage is etymologically sound since the Greek noun and adjective come from *ekphrazein* which means "to speak out," "to tell in full" (*The Sister Arts* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958], 18 note 34). Yet in Renaissance books of rhetoric the word which most frequently occurs for vivid pictures in language is *enargeia* (also translated as *illustratio* and *evidentia* and closely related to *ut pictura poesis*) to show enthusiasm for vivid pictures in language. In praising Homer's use of pictures, Erasmus refers to *evidentia*: "We use this whenever, for the sake of amplifying, adorning, or pleasing, we do not state a thing simply, but set it forth to be viewed as though portrayed in color on a tablet, so that it may seem that we have painted, not narrated, and that the reader has seen, not read" (*On Copia of Words and Ideas*, trans. Donald B. King and H. David Rix [Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1982], 47). Cf. Sister Miriam Joseph, *Rhetoric in Shakespeare's Time* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1962).

"The'Enargia, or clearenness of representation, requird in absolute Poems is not the perspicuous delivery of a lowe invention; but high, and harty invention exprest in most significant, and unaffected phrase; it serves not a skillful Painters turne, to draw the figure of a face onely to make knowne who it represents; but hee must lynn, give luster, shadow, and heightening; which though ignorantls will esteeme spic'd, and too curious, yet such as have the judiciall perspective, will see it hath, motion, spirit, and life,'George Chapman, prefatory letter, Ovid's Banquet of Sense, 1595)," quoted in Rosemond Tuve, *Elizabethan and Metaphysical Imagery* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1947); cf. Sidney, "The Defense of Poesy (1595)," *The Renaissance in England*, ed. Hyder Rollins and Herschel Baker (Boston: D. C. Heath and Co., 1954), 610.


12 T. W. Baldwin, *Shakespeare's Small Latine and Lesse Greeke*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1944), 121:

The'point'was whether Ophelia's cause was'Voluntaria, quae Consilio.'The test is'Nam iacere telurn, voluntatis est.'Did Ophelia wittingly commit the act of drowning? If she went to the water she did. But'ferire quem nolueris, fortunae.'If the water came to her, she did not; then she drowned herself in her own defence,'se offendendo'in fact, as the first Clown rather aptly twists the proper phrase—in spite of the fact that Shakspere knew no Latin! The First Clown is thoroughly correct in his fundamental procedure, however ludicrously he may have expressed it. Shakespeare should have procured this knowledge . . . from *Topica* in Stratford Grammar School.

13 Roland Frye, *The Renaissance Hamlet* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 299: "Over the centuries prior to 1600, both church practice and doctrine consistently held that a person so patently mad as Ophelia should receive the full rites of Christian burial. Her death, however apparently suicide, was not'by her fault'in the sense of rational and responsible choice, but was brought on by her madness, either directly or by the loss of a sense of consequences. Contemporary attitudes in 1600, buttressed by over a thousand years of church history, attest to the Tightness of Laertes'claims for his sister." Cf. Michael MacDonald, "Ophelia's Maimed Rites," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 37 (1986): 309-17.

14 "Peacham says justly that this figure [allegoria] serves to engrave the lively images of things, and to present them under deep shadowes to the contemplation of the mind, wherein wit and judgement take pleasure, and the remembrance receiveth a longlasting impression'(p. 27 [1593])" (Tuve, 108).

15 *Harvard Concordance*: ERR 3.02.45; MND 2.01.150; 3H6 3.02.186; ANT 2.02.209; LUC 1411; ERR 3.02.164; VEN 429; VEN 777; ANT 2.02.207. In Shakespeare's plays the image of mermaids is usually a reference to sirens—to those who are seductive, and one might think this reference an appropriate association
with Hamlet's representation of Ophelia. Roland Frye refers to an emblem from 1567, intriguing for its similarity to aspects of the plot of Hamlet; it points to Mary's public involvement with the assassination of her husband: "A mermaid (traditional symbol for prostitution and adultery) was shown crowned, and labeled with M R' for Maria Regina. Below, a hare represented Bothwell's heraldic crest; it was labeled with the initials I.H. for his name, James Hepburn, and surrounded by a corona of daggers to signify assassination. As the days passed, it became increasingly clear that the suspected adultery would soon be transformed into marriage" (104). The final emblem printed in Green's Shakespeare and the Emblem Writers is one I have not been able to locate myself: a mermaid is pictured circled by a snake biting its tail: "Colophon. 'Ex literarum studiis immortalitatem acquiri.' Alciat, ed. 1534, 45." Given my argument concerning Ophelia, what interests me especially is the association of the mermaid with immortality and eternity. Cf. also Dorothy Dinnerstein, The Mermaid and the Minotaur (New York: Harper Colophon Books, 1975).

16 See the introduction to the Arden edition of A Midsummer Night's Dream (ed. Harold F. Brooks [London: Methuen, 1979]): "the very fact that what Oberon describes is comparable up to a point with each of the two entertainments confirms the conclusion that it has for antecedent not one occasion, but the kind of courtly diversion they both exemplify. It was a kind in which the pageantry frequently drew (as with Arion) from Ovid's mythology, or still better, created new myth in the Ovidian style" (lxviii). Cf. Ashley Montagu's quotation from Peacham's Minerva Britanna 1612: "The friendly Dolphin, while within the maine, / At libertie delightes, to sport and play./ Himselfe is fresh, and doth no whit retaine/ The brinish saltnes of the boundless Sea/ Wherein he lives" (The Dolphin in History [Los Angeles: UCLA Clark Memorial Library, 1963], title page). Antony and Cleopatra: "his delights/ Were dolphin-like, they show'd his back above/ The element they lived in: in his livery / Walk'd crowns and crownets" (V.ii.88-91).

17 In his essay on Quarles's emblem books, Ernest B. Gilman emphasizes the mystery behind both the picture and the language: "On the other side of the ut pictura poesis equation, language might be conceived as intrinsically pictorial, distinguished at its best by the enargeia and colors of the liveliest painter. In the Augustinian tradition the verbum of scripture, although accommodated to the halting human intellect, shadows the nontemporal, luminous res of divine truth. The goal of interpretation—formed in part by the neo-Platonists'sense of our intuitive, unmediated perception of the intelligible as a mode of visionary experience—was to see through language to the realities themselves, from the temporal realities to the eternal realities, from talk to silence, and from discourse to vision. Indeed the technical language of Biblical exegesis (typos, schema, figura, paradigma) is insistently visual ("Word and Image in Quarles'Emblemes," in The Language of Images, ed. W. J. T. Mitchell [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974], 62-63). Perhaps indeed one of the reasons Renaissance writers were so endlessly interested in rhetorical figures is that the desire to hint at this Platonic realm was both culturally strong and also in question. Perhaps emblem books had such enormous popularity as replacements for Catholic icons—pictures of virtues, replacing statues of the Virgin, or as in Hamlet, the picture of Ophelia replacing all that is missing not only for the hero but also, as he himself suggests, in the culture itself.


19 Baldwin, 543.


Hamlet (Vol. 44): Further Reading


Examines the "mythological status of Gertrude" and the themes symbolized by her presence and actions in the play.


Argues that problems and emotions Hamlet experiences, specifically his "anguish and inaction," are not due to some deficiency in Hamlet himself, but rather stem from some "flaw in nature or philosophy."


Discusses Hamlet's delay in obtaining revenge as a function of a pattern of infinite regression in which the process of revenge is prolonged in order to heighten excitement, "since the ending is by its nature anticlimactic."


Uses Yeats's writings on Hamlet to study the character of Horatio as well as Horatio's relationship with Hamlet.


Examines the oedipal issues in Hamlet and concludes that Freudian preoccupation with incestuous attachment prevents one from apprehending the primary concern of Hamlet.


Surveys the feminist criticism of Hamlet, and Ophelia in particular, and argues that Ophelia's tragedy "develops its own, specifically female, mode of discourse."


Explores the appeal and representation of Hamlet throughout history.

Argues that the carnivalesque—which includes puns, role-playing, proverbs, songs, and riddles, among other elements—as it appears in *Hamlet* "is more than an ingredient, digression, or relief," but an "attitude."


Studies Hamlet’s tendency toward play, noting that Hamlet’s playing is not "spontaneous, purposeless fun" but informed by psychological stress, Hamlet’s sense of filial duty, as well as by politics.


Examines the problems posed by the play, and offers a critical review of *Hamlet’s* principal characters and themes.


Argues that Hamlet is "part woman," and his tragedy is that filial duty is forced to triumph "over sensitivity to his own heart."


Studies the discrepancy between the fact that Ophelia is neglected in criticism but remains an "obsessive figure in our cultural mythology." Showalter reviews the responses of feminist critics to this disparity and urges that such critics explore the boundaries of their own ideologies in order to "maintain . . . credibility in representing Ophelia."


Assesses the manner in which androgyny ("The collapse of sexual difference") is represented in *Hamlet* and interpreted by critics, noting that such interpretations range from viewing Hamlet as feminine and impotent to seeing in Gertrude a masculine "castrating woman."

**Hamlet (Vol. 59): Introduction**

*Hamlet*

*Hamlet* is, quite simply, the best known of Shakespeare's plays and the most famous play in Western literature. It is not hard to see why it enjoys such an exalted status. The play, which dates from the middle of Shakespeare's career (around 1600-1), manages to combine a complicated plot, profound insights into the human condition, and non-stop action into one seamless whole. An extraordinary amount of criticism has been written about *Hamlet*; in fact, the journal *Hamlet Studies* is devoted solely to discussion of the play. The amount of criticism generated is matched by its variety; some critics focus on the characters or concentrate on the gender issues that the play addresses, while others examine the play’s highly condensed language and imagery. Critics are also interested in how Shakespeare transformed his sources in creating *Hamlet*, as well as
the play’s various themes and its influence on culture.

Historically, critical attention has been concentrated on the character of Hamlet. In recent years however, critics have begun to focus on other characters as well, especially Ophelia. Gunnar Sjögren (see Further Reading), for example, looks at Ophelia from numerous different critical perspectives in order to “do justice” to her. For Sjögren, the crucial point about Ophelia's characterization is its ambiguity, and he looks to contemporary Elizabethan attitudes and important plays by Shakespeare's rivals in an attempt to judge how her character was meant to be viewed. He examines the relatively lax morals of the Elizabethan court and the characterization of Bel-imperia in Thomas Kyd’s *The Spanish Tragedy* (c. 1586), and concludes that Ophelia is seduced by Hamlet. According to Sjögren, Ophelia is cast aside when she gets in the way of Hamlet’s primary goal of revenge, and her madness arises from Hamlet’s rejection of her. Sjögren concludes by observing that modern performances of *Hamlet* have done justice to Ophelia, for in them “Ophelia comes into her own and emerges as a very interesting part indeed.” Hamlet's relationship with Ophelia has also been of interest to critics. R.A. Foakes (1973) analyzes the effect of Hamlet's cruelty on Ophelia, and Eric P. Levy (1999) examines the encounter between Hamlet and Ophelia in Ophelia's room. Jennifer Low (1999) discusses the symbolic importance of the location of the initial fight between Laertes and Hamlet, which takes place at Ophelia's grave.

It is, however, in feminist criticism and the discussion of gender roles that Ophelia has played a central part. Elaine Showalter (1985) considers how to read Ophelia's story. In an attempt to gain new perspectives on her character, she traces the “cultural history” of Ophelia's representation, both on and off the stage, and examines the connection between female sexuality and insanity. Showalter also examines the feminist revision of Ophelia’s character, and contends that “there is no ‘true’ Ophelia for whom feminist criticism must unambiguously speak,” and that Ophelia’s representation depends entirely on cultural attitudes towards both women and madness. Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor (1996) review the shifting critical attitudes to the female characters in *Hamlet*, commenting that many critics have echoed Hamlet's own misogynistic attitudes towards the women in the play. Thompson and Taylor ultimately contend that the play has “relatively simplistic views of women as angels or whores.”

The discussion of gender issues has always been a politically and culturally charged one. By contrast, the analysis of the language and imagery in *Hamlet* has been relatively tranquil although wide ranging. Richard A. Lanham (1976) traces the uses of rhetoric in the play. He concludes that Shakespeare's two principal preoccupations as a playwright were with style and motive. According to Lanham, the crucial insight *Hamlet* presents is that any sense of morality needs to take into account human beings' inherent theatricality—our self-conscious realization that we are always acting and are forever on stage. Imtiaz Habib (1994) emphasizes how the language of the play will always be misread due in part to Hamlet's ambiguity and in part to the very nature of language. R. Chris Hassel, Jr. (1999) examines the mouse and mousetrap imagery in *Hamlet*.

Despite the recent trend toward concentrating on gender issues and language, two older critical strategies remain well represented in contemporary criticism: source studies and thematic analyses. Cherrell Guilfoyle (1990) deepens the hunt for Shakespeare's sources by tracing Ophelia's character to the legend of Mary Magdalen as developed in medieval drama, and suggests that Shakespeare parallels Mary Magdalen in the character of Ophelia in order to stress the twin ideas of hope and atonement in a play. Frank Nicholas Clary (see Further Reading) returns, as have so many critics and scholars, to one of Shakespeare's sources for *Hamlet*—Belleforest's adaptation of the Saxo Grammaticus story—and concludes that Belleforest's work was more influential than has been previously acknowledged. Manuel Aguirre (1996) examines the literary origins of the cup from which Gertrude drinks a fatal toast to Hamlet in the play's final scene, and argues that by Shakespeare's time women's mythic role within society was being undermined. From Aguirre's perspective, Shakespeare's attention to the theme of sovereignty dramatizes the clash between older and newer ideologies. Millicent Bell (1998) also studies *Hamlet's* concern with a particular theme: in this case, revenge. Bell shows that one of Shakespeare's intentions in *Hamlet* was to satirize the revenge-play genre by means of both the
overstylized play-within-the-play and the conclusion of the play itself. The critic contends that the play-within-the-play, *The Murder of Gonzago*, is “stale bombast,” and Hamlet's concern with revenge is nowhere to be seen when he is dying, noting that, rather than crying out for revenge, Hamlet asks only to be remembered.

**Hamlet (Vol. 59): Criticism: Overviews And General Studies**


*[In the following excerpt, Edwards analyzes Hamlet in a linear fashion, emphasizing the complexity of the play and examining the choices open to the protagonist.]*

**THE PLATFORM**

*Hamlet* opens with soldiers on guard at night in a scene full of perturbation and anxiety. It is nervousness about the apparition which predominates, of course, ‘this thing’, ‘this dreaded sight’, looking exactly like the late king in full armour. It is an ominous thing, and the sceptic Horatio, who is quickly converted, fears that it ‘bodes some strange eruption to our state’. The state is already in turmoil, being hastily put on a war footing. Fortinbras of Norway is threatening to invade Denmark to recover lands which his father lost to the late King Hamlet a generation ago. Recollection of that old combat coming on top of the apparition focuses all attention on the dead king. The practice of calling the king by the name of his country enforces an identity between king and kingdom, the health of the one reflecting the health of the other, so that the old king's death seems to mark the end of an era. ‘The king that's dead’ is referred to as ‘the majesty of buried Denmark’. Much later, the first words of the mad Ophelia are ‘Where is the beauteous majesty of Denmark?’ Even a routine cry like Bernardo's ‘Long live the king!’ in the third line of the play takes an additional meaning as we sense the apprehension of the watch for what may be the consequences for Denmark of the loss of their hero-king.

*Hamlet* is about Denmark as well as its prince. How Denmark fares as a society is in our minds all the time. But of course it’s not just Hamlet and Denmark. Though Hamlet is at the centre of the play, he exists in his relationships, familial, social, sexual, political, divine; and even Hamlet, the most famous ‘individual’ in drama, is not so exclusively the centre that he diminishes the importance of what he is related to: family, society, God.

Since it is his threat to the kingdom which is the cause of the watch being set, young Fortinbras may be said to start the play off. In fact he encircles it, seeing that he enters at the very end to take over the kingdom without having to fight for it. Having so satisfactorily concluded his business, he will be able to give his ‘landless resolutes’ whatever they would like to have. Fortinbras succeeds where Hamlet fails, though Hamlet has been trying to right a great wrong and Fortinbras has been interested only in reversing the lawful outcome of his father's reckless challenge.

**‘I KNOW NOT SEEMS’**

Prince Hamlet in black carries into the court (in 1.2) that memory of the dead king which Claudius and Gertrude are anxious to erase. His grief, he says, is real not assumed, unlike (he implies) the emotions being expressed around him. But the most determined candour could scarcely reveal in public what he pours out when he is alone: his feeling of total despair, *of taedium vitae*, of the weary meaninglessness of ‘all the uses of this world’. He has no wish to continue living, but divine law forbids suicide. Why is all this? Because his father has suddenly died and his mother has speedily taken a new husband. Too slight a ground for despair? Hamlet's protestations are extreme. To call Claudius a satyr—a lecherous goat-like creature—does not make
much sense to an audience who has just seen the new king efficiently managing his courtiers and the affairs of
the nation. His mother's remarriage makes him call in question the constancy of all women. 'Hyperion to a
satyr!' 'Frailty, thy name is woman!' Such passionate attachment to his father, such contempt for his uncle,
such disgust with his mother, may seem pathological, what Eliot would call 'in excess of the facts'. Hamlet's
indignation does indeed go deeper than the 'facts' but its source is not morbid.

The story of Cain and Abel is brought into the play during this scene (105) and appears again twice (3.3.38
and 5.1.65).¹ That first murder shattered the human family; it resulted from and betokened man's falling away
from God. The identification of Claudius with Cain—which he himself makes—gives us the context in which
we should put the 'unreasonable' bitterness of Hamlet, though as yet he knows nothing about any murder. In
his book Violence and the Sacred, René Girard argued that cultural breakdown in early society, what he terms
the 'sacrificial crisis', involves the failure to recognise acknowledged distinctions and differences. The erasure
of difference shows itself in myth in the mortal rivalry of two brothers for what cannot be shared, a throne, a
woman. Girard quotes the 'degree' speech in Shakespeare's Troilus and Cressida as an inspired perception of
the chaos and violence which flow from the weakening of accepted distinctions. If, instead of the reading
'each thing meets in mere oppugnancy', he had followed the quarto text with 'each thing melts in mere
oppugnancy', he would have shown how even more forcefully the passage conveys the rooted fear of the loss
of category, of identity, of distinctiveness.

The obliteration of distinction, before Hamlet knows anything about fratricide or adultery, lies in Claudius
taking his brother's place as king and husband and in Gertrude tranquilly accepting him as substitute. Their
acts may offend against taste and ethics but the deeper offence is the undermining of an ideal of the person
enshrined in antiquity and law. Hamlet's expressions, 'Hyperion to a satyr' and 'no more like my father / Than
I to Hercules', show a mythographic ordering of the human differences. So in the closet scene Hamlet tries to
force the distinction of the two men on to his mother by means of the two pictures. ‘Have you eyes?’ he
shouts at her—

See what a grace was seated on this brow;
Hyperion's curls, the front of Jove himself,
An eye like Mars, to threaten and command;
A station like the herald Mercury ...

(3.4.55-8)

This matter of the blurring of distinctions in a man claiming to be his brother helps to explain Hamlet's
passion against Claudius as a usurper—

A slave that is not twentieth part the tithe
Of your precedent lord, a vice of kings,
A cutpurse of the empire and the rule ...

(3.4.97-9)

Denmark is an elective monarchy as Hamlet knows quite well (see 1.2.109, 5.2.65, 335).² But Shakespeare
plays off this elective monarchy against his Elizabethan audience's deep emotional commitment to
primogeniture and the right of a son to inherit. The Danish system condemns itself; a country which chooses
its kings ends up with the rabble-cry of 'Choose we! Laertes shall be king!' (4.5.106). It has chosen for its
king one who, did they but know, organised the vacancy by murder. For the audience, the system is a legalism
which runs counter to their instinctive sense of rightness. There is a higher court than the court of Denmark,
and in that court Hamlet is the dispossessed prince. Hamlet himself is both a Dane and an Elizabethan;
whatever Danish law says, Claudius has usurped his brother, and violently appropriated a kingship he has no
right to.
Gertrude's offence in confusing the two brothers is much deepened in the audience's eyes later in the first act when they learn that she committed adultery with Claudius while her husband was alive. ... The willingness of this complaisant woman to sleep with either of two brothers is a forceful image of the failure of discrimination which is central to the tragedy of Hamlet.

In this second scene Hamlet is unaware of adultery or murder. But he has repudiated with contempt the appropriation of that vital distinction of fatherhood which Claudius grandly tries to add to his other appropriations. 'But now my cousin Hamlet, and my son ...' Hamlet will not accept the relationship; it is 'more than kin'. He knows he is not Claudius's son, and the same knowledge tells him that Claudius is not Gertrude's husband, nor Denmark's king. It is this knowledge, as well as grief for a father's death and the shallowness of a mother's love, which makes the whole world an unweeded garden.

THE GHOST

Hamlet is galvanised into activity by the news of the appearance of a ghost that resembles his dead father. On the platform that night he sees it and is determined to speak to it whatever happens. It is explanation he wants; explanation and a course of action. 'Let me not burst in ignorance', he cries. 'What should we do?' Though it is specific explanation—why the Ghost has come—and a specific course of action—what the Ghost wants him to do—that he seeks, his words have a wider perspective. The Ghost may have some secret, some unimaginable truth to bring relief from those 'thoughts beyond the reaches of our souls', an explanation why things are as they are and a directive for meaningful action. To his demands in both their specific and their general senses he receives, or thinks he receives, a more than sufficient response.

The Ghost declares that he is his father's spirit, gives him the extraordinary tidings of murder and adultery, and asks him to take revenge. His injunctions are summed up in the three imperatives, 'Bear it not', 'Taint not thy mind', 'Leave her to heaven.' These interconnect. 'Bear it not' looks both backwards and forwards. The idea of retribution is implied by the Ghost's appeal to Hamlet's 'nature', that is, his filial piety. 'Bear it not' means that as a son he is not to acquiesce in and accept what has been done to his father. But it looks also to the future. The abuse of Denmark by the very continuation of this pair in sovereignty and in marriage is not to be endured: 'Bear it not.' The second imperative is very strange: 'howsomerver thou pursues this act, / Taint not thy mind'. Whatever the exact meaning of 'taint'..., the tone of the remark is that the Ghost does not consider this matter of revenge too difficult an act, and is anxious that Hamlet should not become too disturbed about it. No doubt for the Ghost the challenge is like that which he accepted all those years ago when he agreed to face old Fortinbras in a single combat: a matter of honour, determination, courage and skill. The final injunction, 'Leave her to heaven', must temper our feeling of the Ghost's personal vindictiveness. It is more important, however, in giving a religious context to the punishment of Claudius and Gertrude. Gertrude's earthly punishment is to be her conscience: 'those thorns that in her bosom lodge / To prick and sting her'. Whatever further punishment or exoneration is hers to receive belongs to an after-life. With Claudius it is different. By his words 'Leave her to heaven', the Ghost must imply that a higher justice requires the exemplary punishment of Claudius on earth, by the hand of an appointed human being. The Ghost's commands indicate not the pursuit of personal satisfaction but the existence of a world beyond the human world responsible for justice in the human world. Whether the Ghost has the authority to convey this the play never makes clear.

Awful though it is, Hamlet now has his explanation. What had seemed the degeneration of the world turns out to be a condition which is clearly and starkly the consequence of a double crime. He now also has his directive, a commission that is also a mission. His reaction to the Ghost is like a religious conversion. He wipes away all previous knowledge, all previous values, and baptises himself as a new man (1.5.95-104).

And thy commandment all alone shall live
Within the book and volume of my brain,
Unmixed with baser matter.

The commandment is summed up by the Ghost as ‘Remember!’ ‘Remember me’, says the Ghost, and Hamlet repeats the word three times in his dedication. The Ghost is to be remembered ‘whiles memory holds a seat / In this distracted globe’, that is to say so long as this now-disordered world attributes any value to the past and its traditions, to the established standards of virtue and justice. … In this speech, to remember means more than to keep in mind; it means to maintain and to restore. In the section ‘Of Redemption’ in Thus Spake Zarathustra, Nietzsche deplored those who could not accept the ‘It was’ of time. He saw vengeance and punishment as an imprisonment of the will in concentrating on the past in an effort to undo what could not be undone. ‘This, yea, this is very vengeance!—Will's abhorrence of time and its “It was”.’³ It is quite clear that Hamlet is not prepared to accept the ‘It was’ of time, and that he regards revenge as a task of creative remembrance, that is, the restoration of a society that has fallen to pieces. The act ends with

The time is out of joint: O cursed spite,
That ever I was born to set it right.

This is a terrible moment as, all exhilaration gone, he faces the burden of his responsibilities. But who has told him that it is his responsibility to put the world to rights? to restore the disjointed frame of things to its true shape? No one but himself. It is the entirely self-imposed burden of cleansing the world that he now groans under.

THE ANTIC DISPOSITION

‘As a stranger give it welcome’, says Hamlet to Horatio about the supernatural visitation.

There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio,
Than are dreamt of in your philosophy.

He identifies himself with the world of the stranger, and shows his alienation from Denmark and its values by adopting the garb of madness. The ‘antic disposition’ (an essential element in the old Amleth story) puzzles and worries the man who is now his enemy and sworn victim; it also has symbolic significance in denoting that Hamlet, like Bunyan's Christian, having received his call, considers himself a pilgrim and a stranger in his own city of Vanity Fair. Madness is conduct which does not conform to society's standards. Very well, says Hamlet, I am a madman.⁴

Shakespeare carefully marks a considerable lapse of time between Acts 1 and 2. … The first event in Hamlet's mission that we hear about is his silent ritual of divorce from Ophelia. Ophelia's tragedy, like Hamlet's, is the tragedy of obedience to a father. Only she really goes mad. And then—always going one step further than the prince—she doesn't stop at thinking about ending her life. At this stage in the play, she has obeyed her father and refused to see Hamlet. She now tells Polonius of the very peculiar encounter she has had with him. Hamlet, in a set piece of antic theatre, went dishevelled to her room and in total silence carried out what we might interpret as a ceremony of questioning, denunciation and separation. By this, he cuts the closest tie that binds him to the court of Denmark, and takes his school-fellow Horatio as his only confidant.

What are the values of ‘Denmark’ as we are shown them? The court party, Claudius, Polonius, Laertes, are much given to expressing their beliefs in resonant platitudes. Claudius knows the proper response to death, Laertes to sex, Polonius to everything. With each person, we see the insufficiency of their moralising. What Claudius is hiding we learn in 1.5 (though it is not confirmed until 3.1.50), and he is hiding it even from his new wife, who in turn tried to hide her double-life from her husband. Laertes is suspected by both his sister and his father of an inclination towards the primrose path of dalliance. Polonius advocates reticence, truth and straightforwardness, but is loquacious and devious. It is the ever-ready platitudes, betrayed both by their rhetoric and by the conduct of those who utter them, that Hamlet discards as mere ‘saws of books’ as he enters his new
life. It is interesting that the heavy moralising of the court party accompanies a low view of human nature. Polonius and Laertes both expect Hamlet to be the insouciant seducer that is their stereotype of an aristocrat. (Hamlet, on the other hand, is an ‘idealist’, expecting mothers to be above sexual desire.) Polonius's proclivity for spying—which leads to his own violent death—is shown in the grotesque commission to Reynaldo to keep an eye on Laertes in Paris and then in his schemes to find out what's wrong with Hamlet. Claudius has much greater need than Polonius to find out what lies behind Hamlet's strange behaviour; his elaborate plot to use Rosencrantz and Guildenstern as decoys is quickly uncovered by Hamlet.

What Hamlet is really thinking about during the long scene 2.2 is impossible to say. Everything he says to Polonius, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern has its irony, and if his hearers do not know when he is being sane and serious, nor do we. When he tells Rosencrantz and Guildenstern that he is ‘most dreadfully attended’ (255) he is not really talking about his servants. He may have the Ghost in mind, but chiefly he must mean his own thoughts. We are sure enough of him when he says he finds Denmark a prison. And with that extraordinary end to his joke about Polonius taking his leave—'except my life, except my life, except my life’—we must feel the warning note that the *taedium vitae* which lifted from him when the Ghost spoke is descending again and that the ultimate dilemma of ‘To be or not to be’ is at hand.

What we should discount as an index of Hamlet's feelings is the famous speech ‘What a piece of work is a man’ (286-91). So often pointed to as a brilliant perception of the anguish of Renaissance man in general and of Hamlet in particular, it is a glorious blind, a flight of rhetoric by which a divided and distressed soul conceals the true nature of his distress and substitutes a formal and conventional state of Weltschmerz. At the end of it he punctures the rhetoric himself.

**ROGUE AND PEASANT SLAVE**

We are often reminded that Pyrrhus is, with Hamlet, Laertes and Fortinbras, another son avenging the slaying of his father (Achilles). But Hamlet swings into the rant of his second soliloquy not in any desire to emulate the cruel fury of Pyrrhus but out of shame that an actor's emotion for Pyrrhus's victim, Hecuba, should outdo his own emotion for Claudius's victim, his father. He has done nothing—it is true enough. But the effect of the eloquence of the old play and the actor's moving performance is to make him confuse doing with exhibition. His outburst is violent but essentially comic. His guilt runs away with him. Feeling that if he were a proper avenger he would exhibit a huge amount of passion he lets go a mammoth display of self-accusation and rage, culminating in a great stage-cry, ‘O vengeance!’

With this, he becomes ashamed of his hysterical attitudinising and rebukes himself for unpacking his heart with words. He turns from rant to action. What has to be done? The idea of using the players to test the Ghost's veracity was in his mind before he fell ‘a-cursing like a very drab’ (see 2.2.493-5). Hamlet had approached the Ghost knowing it might be either a demon from hell or a spirit from heaven. Perhaps he accepted it as an ‘honest ghost’ with too little question. That he should test the Ghost's account before he proceeds to take the king's life is the most obvious precaution. He says all that needs to be said on this subject (551-5). The Ghost could be a spirit from hell taking advantage of his distress to lure him into an act that will damn his soul.

That Hamlet in deciding to use the test of a play is guilty of procrastination is scarcely tenable. ... Procrastination means putting off until tomorrow what you know ought to be done today. *Hamlet* is indeed a tragedy of delay, but procrastination is only one special form of delay. At least part of the reason for his delay so far must be Hamlet's fear that he is being deluded by the devil into imperilling the life of Claudius and the fate of his own soul.

**‘TO BE OR NOT TO BE’**
Act 3 begins next day, the day that the court play is to be given. But even if we are aware of this lapse of time since Hamlet decided to use a play to test the king, it is a shock to us to find Hamlet speaking as he does, for the ‘To be or not to be’ soliloquy throws everything back into debate.

What is the question, ‘to be or not to be’? All sorts of answers have been given. I can't doubt that Hamlet is asking whether one should go on living or whether one should take one's life. He is back in the depression of the first soliloquy, longing for the oblivion of death. But now the question whether life is worthwhile has much more knowledge and experience to take account of and brood over, and it assumes an entirely new significance. It is extraordinary that, at this moment in the play, the soliloquy should seem so indifferent to the immediate problem of killing the king. Implicitly the issue is there all the time, but never explicitly. The reason for that is that killing the king has become part of a much wider debate.

To be or not to be, that is the question—
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. To die, to sleep—
No more; and by a sleep to say we end
The heart-ache and the thousand natural shocks
That flesh is heir to—'tis a consummation
Devoutly to be wished.

The question is which of two courses is the nobler. The first alternative is ‘to be’, to go on living, and this is a matter of endurance, of contriving to accept the continuous punishing hostility of life. The second alternative is ‘not to be’, to take one's life, and this is described as ending a sea of troubles by taking arms against it. There is only the one opposition to be made against the sea of troubles (which is the definition of our life) and that is the constructive act of suicide. Suicide is the one way in which fighting against the ungovernable tide—that mythical symbol of hopeless endeavour—can succeed.

If we accept that Hamlet's alternative in these opening lines is the course of enduring or the course of evading life's onslaught, there is an important consequence. The life that has to be suffered or evaded is described as a continuous, permanent condition of misfortune, and must therefore include the state of the world even after vengeance has been taken and Claudius killed—supposing that to happen. The whips and scorns of time, the oppressor's wrong—there is no indication that these can ever disappear from the world, except by disappearing from the world oneself. By his stark alternative in these opening lines Hamlet implicitly rejects the possibility that any act of his could improve the condition of the world or the condition of its victims. Revenge is of no avail. Whether Hamlet kills the king or not, Denmark will continue to be a prison, a place of suffering ruled by fortune. The only nobleness which is available if one goes on living is not the cleansing of the world by some great holy deed, but endurance, suffering in the mind.

But, as the soliloquy proceeds, the one positive act available to man, suicide, has to be ruled out. The sleep of death becomes a nightmare, because of the dread of damnation. What began as a question which was more noble ends as a contest in cowardliness. What is one the more afraid of, the possibility of damnation or the certainty of suffering on earth?

And so we do nothing, frightened to take the one route out of our misery. ‘Thus conscience doth make cowards of us all.’ ‘Conscience’ means what it normally means, what it means when Claudius uses it just before this (50) and when Hamlet uses it in the previous scene (2.2.558); that is to say, it has its religious meaning of an implanted sense of right and wrong. It is with this reflection that Hamlet moves away from suicide; it is with this ‘regard’—this examination of the consequences of things and worrying about how they look in the eye of eternity—that other ‘enterprises of great pitch and moment’ lose the name of action. Hamlet must be thinking about killing Claudius. So, although only by inference and indirectly, Hamlet twice refers to
his revenge in this soliloquy. On the first occasion we gather that he no longer has any faith that killing the
king would be a cleansing act setting the world to rights; on the second, we gather that his resolution to exact
revenge has been 'sicklied o'er' by respects of conscience. His conscience cannot convince him that the act is
good; and, whether good or bad, it cannot change the world. We are condemned to unhappiness and to
inactivity. Although this speech represents a trough of despair into which we don't see Hamlet fall again, the
whole of the rest of the play is coloured by the extreme pessimism of this soliloquy.

It certainly affects his behaviour to Ophelia in the painful, cruel interview which now follows. All he says is
backed by a loathing of the world, a loathing of himself, and a loathing of sex. It is hard for Ophelia that she
should be in his way just at this moment, to trigger off an eruption of anger and disgust. At the same time, we
realise that Hamlet sees his victim as life's victim. Her innocence cannot survive; she is unavoidably subject to
the contagion of living; she will be corrupted by men as inevitably as, being a woman, she will corrupt them.
When he says she should go to a nunnery, he means a nunnery. Only if she is locked up in perpetual virginity
can she be saved. And there will be no more marriage. Hamlet begins to work at a new way of saving
mankind—sexual abstinence.

Although I believe that Hamlet is primarily a religious play, and that Hamlet perpetually sees himself in a
relationship with heaven and hell, yet it is noticeable that Hamlet voices very few really Christian
sentiments—as contrasted with both Claudius and Ophelia. Only once, and then in his usual ironic manner,
does he talk of praying (1.5.132). It is in this scene of cruelty to Ophelia, if anywhere, that behind the restless,
unending teasing and taunting we might feel Hamlet's strong sense of his personal unworthiness and need of
assistance. ‘What should such fellows as I do crawling between earth and heaven?’

PLAY, PRAYER, MURDER

Hamlet is not content to let his ‘mousetrap’ play on the murder of Gonzago take its toll of Claudius's
conscience without assistance. He forces its significance at Claudius as he later forces the poisoned cup at him
(3.2.237-9). His insistent commentary gives Claudius the opportunity to cover his departure with righteous
indignation against his nephew's impossible behaviour. At any rate, Hamlet has achieved his purpose. He is
convinced of Claudius's guilt and he has made Claudius know that he knows. Hamlet does not lack courage.
But what to do with this knowledge now? There is no way of avoiding the fact that at this critical juncture,
with the Ghost's story confirmed, he chooses to do precisely what the Ghost forbade, take action against his
mother.

First there is the difficult problem of how to take his extraordinary speech about drinking hot blood.

'Tis now the very witching time of night,
When churchyards yawn, and hell itself breathes out
Contagion to this world. Now could I drink hot blood,
And do such bitter business as the day
Would quake to look on. Soft, now to my mother.
O heart, lose not thy nature ...

(3.2.349-54)

Some say that this speech is a sign that Hamlet has committed himself to hell; some say that he is rather
awkwardly trying out the traditional role of the avenger of fiction. There is a grain of truth in both these
theories, but neither can of itself explain the speech. We have just seen Hamlet, who has been at a peak of
emotional intensity during and immediately after the play scene, in a keen and fierce verbal attack on
Rosencrantz, Guildenstern and Polonius. That he should at this point in all seriousness bellow out like some
Herod of the stage ‘Now could I drink hot blood’ is to me incredible. The rant of the ‘rogue and peasant slave’
soliloquy, induced by the emotion of the Pyrrhus speech, was understandable, but this seems quite out of
keeping with character and situation. But that Hamlet should fear his declension into hellish activity, should fear himself slipping into the role of the stage-avenger, I could well imagine. The contagion of hell is what he wishes to avoid, and the last thing he wants to do is ‘drink hot blood’. He says the words with a shiver of apprehension and disgust. Then, ‘Soft, now to my mother.’ As so often in this play, ‘soft!’ is a word of warning to oneself to turn away from some undesirable train of thought and attend to an immediate problem…. ‘O heart, lose not thy nature.’ He really does fear he may do something terrible.

Action is now hedged about with all sorts of warnings and limitations concerning the good it can do to the world or the harm it can do to him. But there is one task of primary urgency, whatever the Ghost said: to shame and reclaim his mother. On the way to see her, he comes across Claudius at prayer. He goes over to kill him, then pauses as he had paused over suicide, to reflect on the consequences. Again it is the after-life that is uppermost in his mind, but the fear about damnation now is that Claudius may not be damned. He wants Claudius damned, and he is not prepared to take the risk that if he kills him while he is praying he will go to heaven. He will wait for an opportunity that will make revenge more complete and damnation more certain.

Then trip him that his heels may kick at heaven,
And that his soul may be as damned and black
As hell whereto it goes.

(3.3.93-5)

Savagery of this order is familiar to students of Elizabethan revenge fiction. Perhaps the contagion of hell has touched Hamlet. But, repellent though it is that Hamlet so passionately wants the eternal perdition of his victim, it is perhaps more striking that he should think that it is in his power to control the fate of Claudius's soul. It is surely a monstrously inflated conception of his authority that is governing him, distorting still further the scope of the Ghost's injunctions. In this scene the arrogance of the man who is trying to effect justice is strongly contrasted with the Christian humility of the man who has done murder.

Hamlet means what he says in the prayer scene. The procrastination theory held that once again Hamlet was finding some excuse for not acting. This cannot be right, for a minute or two later, thinking he has found Claudius in the ignominious and dishonourable position of eavesdropping behind the arras in Gertrude's chamber, he kills him—only to find that it is Polonius. The killing of Polonius is a major climax. In spite of whatever doubts and mental stress about the authority of the Ghost and the meaning of its message, about the need to do the deed or the good it would do, here deliberately and violently he keeps his word and carries out his revenge; and he kills the wrong man. This terrible irony is the direct result of his decisions since the end of the play scene, which imply his belief in his power to control the destinies in this life and in the after-life of both Gertrude and Claudius, his assumption of the role of Providence itself.

From the killing of Polonius the catastrophe of the play stems. This false completion of Hamlet's revenge initiates the second cycle of revenge for a murdered father, that of Laertes for Polonius. That revenge is successful and ends in the death of Hamlet. By unwittingly killing Polonius, Hamlet brings about his own death.

THE CLOSET SCENE

Nothing in the play is more bizarre than that Hamlet, having committed the terrible error of killing Polonius, should be so consumed with the desire to purge and rescue his mother that he goes right on with his castigation even with the dead body of Polonius at his feet. No wonder the Ghost enters again to whet his ‘almost blunted purpose’. Hamlet well knows that in this present heat (‘time and passion’) he should be obedient to his vow and apply himself to a grimmer task. But he does nothing. It is remarkable that he fears the presence of the Ghost will actually weaken his resolve to kill Claudius: that his response to this shape of
his dead father will be pity not retribution. The Ghost could ‘convert / My stern effects’ and there would be ‘tears perchance for blood’ (3.4.126-29). This fear for the strength of his resolution should be compared with the heavy-heartedness at the prospect of carrying out the execution as he looks at Polonius's corpse: ‘Thus bad begins and worse remains behind’ (180).

There seems no deep compunction for Polonius's death, however, and no lessening of the sense of his privilege to ordain for others.

I do repent; but heaven hath pleased it so,
To punish me with this, and this with me,
That I must be their scourge and minister.

(3.4.173-6)

Poor Polonius! Hamlet is at his worst in these scenes. His self-righteousness expands in his violent rebukes of his mother and his eagerness to order her sex-life. ‘Forgive me this my virtue’, he says, going on to explain that in these upside-down times ‘virtue itself of vice must pardon beg’. Yet the force of his words, and what appears to be the first intimation that her husband was murdered, instill into her that sense of difference which he has fought to re-establish. At the beginning she asks in indignation and bewilderment, ‘What have I done?’ But later she says, ‘O Hamlet, speak no more’, and ‘What shall I do?’

TO ENGLAND

From this point onwards there are two plays of Hamlet, that of the second quarto and that of the Folio. I have argued … that the Folio version with its omissions and additions has much to be said for it, knowing what its hero has become by the end of the closet scene in a way that the seemingly more tentative and exploratory version in the second quarto does not. The changes in the Folio substitute for a rather contradictory talkativeness in Hamlet about being sent to England with his revenge unaccomplished a silence as mysterious and suggestive as the silence that lies between Acts 1 and 2. They also add a central passage in 5.2 in which the problem of damnation which has occupied Hamlet throughout is given an answer.

There is a real want of resolution concerning his revenge in Hamlet's going away to England, though it is concealed in the exciting scenes in which he courageously and scornfully spars with Claudius, who is now absolutely determined to destroy the man who knows his secret. It may be that he is biding his time, or is baffled and mortified by his own inability to act, as the two main passages omitted from the Folio suggest, but we feel that there are deeper things restraining him, hinted at in what he says to Horatio when he comes back.

Sir, in my heart there was a kind of fighting
That would not let me sleep.

(5.2.4-5)

While Hamlet is away, we see the effects of what he has so far achieved, in the madness of Ophelia and the furious return of Laertes. To avenge his father is for Laertes an inalienable duty, whatever may be its status in the eternal world.

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 throughly for my father.
For Hamlet it is quite the contrary. Revenge in itself is uninteresting and foreign. It is only the question of its place as a creative and restorative ‘remembering’ deed within the values of the eternal world that is important to him.

THE RETURN

The news of Hamlet's return astounds the king, and he hastens to employ Laertes in a scheme to destroy him finally. Act 5 opens with the two clowns digging a grave for Ophelia. The joke of the senior of these, the sexton, that of all men he who builds strongest is the gravedigger, is something to ponder on at the end of the play. The sexton is the only person in the play who is a match for Hamlet in the combat of words. He manages to avoid answering Hamlet's question, ‘Whose grave's this?’ Not until the funeral procession arrives does Hamlet learn that the grave is for Ophelia, and it does not appear from the play that he was aware of her madness. Many people feel that in Hamlet's reflections over the empty grave on the vanity of life and the inevitability of death there is a mature and sober wisdom. But the presentation of this wisdom is entirely ironic. His truths are based on a chasm of ignorance. He speaks his words over a grave which he does not know is intended for a woman whose madness and death he is responsible for. The fact of the dead girl punctures his philosophy. For us, at any rate. He never speaks of his regret for the suffering he caused her even before Polonius's death. On the contrary, when Laertes leaps into the grave and expresses, too clamantly perhaps, an affection for Ophelia which he genuinely feels, Hamlet will not accept it, and chooses this moment to advance and declare himself, with a challenge to Laertes' sincerity. He claims 'I loved Ophelia'—with a love forty thousand brothers could not match. It is hard to know what right Hamlet has to say that when we think of how we have seen him treat her. The dispute over Ophelia's grave seems very important. Laertes is more than a foil to Hamlet; he is a main antagonist, diametrically opposed to him in every way of thought and action, who is scheming to kill him by a dreadful trick. But Shakespeare refuses to belittle him or let us despise him. And he refuses to sentimentalise his opponent or whitewash his failings. For those of us who to any extent ‘believe in’ Hamlet, Shakespeare makes things difficult in this scene. It is tragedy not sentimental drama that he is writing, and our division of mind about Hamlet is partly why the play is a tragedy.

In the all-important colloquy with Horatio at the beginning of the final scene, Hamlet tells him of the strong sense he has that his impulsive actions on board ship were guided by a divinity which takes over from us ‘when our deep plots do pall’ and redirects us. This is a critical juncture of the play, implying Hamlet's surrender of his grandiose belief in his power to ordain and control, and his release from the alternating belief in the meaningless and mindless drift of things. His recognition, vital though it is, is his own, and we do not necessarily have to share it.

The sense of heaven guiding him reinforces rather than diminishes his sense of personal responsibility for completing his mission. The discovery of the king's treachery in the commission to have him murdered in England has fortified Hamlet's determination. Yet it is with a demand for assurance that he puts the matter to Horatio.

Does it not, think thee, stand me now upon—
He that hath killed my king, and whored my mother,
Popped in between th'election and my hopes,
Thrown out his angle for my proper life,
And with such cozenage—is't not perfect conscience
To quit him with this arm? And is't not to be damned
To let this canker of our nature come
In further evil?
(5.2.63-70)

It is difficult to see how we can take this speech except as the conclusion of a long and deep perplexity. But if it is a conclusion, that question mark—conveying so much more than indignation—makes it an appeal by this loneliest of heroes for support and agreement, which he pointedly does not get from the cautious Horatio, who simply says,

*It must be shortly known to him from England
What is the issue of the business there.*

Horatio won't accept the responsibility of answering, and only gives him the exasperating response that he hasn't much time.

Once again Hamlet has raised the question of conscience and damnation. Conscience is no longer an obstacle to action, but encourages it. As for damnation, Hamlet had felt the threat of it if he contemplated suicide, felt the threat of it if he were to kill at the behest of a devil-ghost; now he feels the threat of it if he should fail to remove from the world a cancer which is spreading. This new image for Claudius, a ‘canker of our nature’, is important. All the vituperation which Hamlet has previously thrown at Claudius seems mere rhetoric by this. Hamlet now sees himself undertaking a surgical operation to remove a cancer from human society. Whether the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune continue or not is immaterial. To neglect, ignore or encourage the evil is to imperil one's soul.

**THE SILENCE OF THE GHOST**

When in reply to Hamlet's unanswerable question Horatio tells him that if he is going to act he had better move quickly, because as soon as Claudius learns the fate of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Hamlet won't have another hour to live, Hamlet exclaims ‘The interim’s mine.’ But of course it isn't, because the plot against his life has already been primed and is about to go off. Hamlet has no time left to act upon his new conviction that it is a religious duty to strike down Claudius. He accepts the fake challenge of the fencing match in the awareness that something may be afoot, and he faces it without any exhilaration: ‘Thou wouldst not think how ill all's here about my heart.’ When he says ‘If it be now, 'tis not to come … the readiness is all’, we assume he has some kind of prevision of what actually happens, the coming together of his revenge and his own death. Laertes wounds him fatally before he is able to make his second attempt to kill the king. The first time, he killed the wrong man; the second time, he kills the king indeed, but not until he is within moments of his own death.

There is no doubt of the extent of Hamlet's failure. In trying to restore ‘the beauteous majesty of Denmark’ he has brought the country into an even worse state, in the hands of a foreigner. He is responsible, directly or indirectly, for the deaths of Polonius, Ophelia, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. With more justification, he has killed Laertes and Claudius. But if his uncle is dead, so is his mother.

What does the Ghost think of it all? He has disappeared. There is no word of approval, or sorrow, or anger. He neither praises his dead son nor blames him. Nor, if he was a devil, does he come back to gloat over the devastation he has caused. The rest is silence indeed.8

In Kyd's *Spanish Tragedy*, the ghost of the dead Andrea and his escort from the infernal world of spirits, named Revenge, were on stage during the whole of the play. It was absolutely clear that the ultimate direction of things was entirely in the hands of the gods of the underworld. At the end of the play Andrea rejoiced in the fulfilment of his revenge and happily surveyed the carnage on the stage. ‘Ay, these were spectacles to please my soul!’ He helped to apportion eternal sentences, whose ‘justice’ makes our blood run cold.
In spite of the seeming crudity of *The Spanish Tragedy*, it is a subtle and sinister view of the relation of gods and men that the play conveys. Kyd's gods are dark gods. Men and women plot and scheme to fulfil their desires and satisfy their hatreds, they appeal to heaven for guidance, help and approval, but the dark gods are in charge of everything, and they use every morsel of human striving in order to achieve their predestined purposes. Hieronimo's heroic efforts to obtain justice, which drive him into madness and his wife to suicide, are nothing to the gods except as they may be used to fulfil their promise to Andrea.

*Hamlet* resists the grim certainties of Kyd's theology and the certainties of any other. Hamlet's own belief towards the end of the play that a benign divinity works through our spontaneous impulses and even our mistakes is neither clearly endorsed by the play nor repudiated in ironic Kydean laughter. Hamlet is a tragic hero who at a time of complete despair hears a mysterious voice uttering a directive which he interprets as a mission to renovate the world by an act of purifying violence. But this voice is indeed a questionable voice. How far it is the voice of heaven, how its words are to be translated into human deeds, how far the will of man can change the course of the world—these are questions that torment the idealist as he continues to plague the decadent inhabitants, as he sees them, of the Danish court.

His doubts, at one edge of his nature, are as extreme as his confidence at the other. His sense of his freedom to create his own priorities and decisions, and indeed his sense of being heaven's scourge and minister privileged to destroy at will, bring him to the disaster of killing Polonius, from which point all changes, and he becomes the hunted as well as the hunter. Eventually, in a new humility as his 'deep plots' pall, Hamlet becomes convinced that heaven is guiding him and that the removal of Claudius is a task that he is to perform at the peril of his immortal soul. He does indeed kill Claudius, but the cost is dreadful. What has he achieved, as he dies with Claudius?

It is very hard for us in the twentieth century to sympathise with Hamlet and his mission. Hearing voices from a higher world belongs mainly in the realm of abnormal psychology. Revenge may be common but is hardly supportable. The idea of purifying violence belongs to terrorist groups. Gertrude's sexual behaviour and remarriage do not seem out of the ordinary. Yet if we feel that twentieth-century doubt hampers our understanding of the seventeenth-century *Hamlet*, we must remember that *Hamlet* was actually written in our own age of doubt and revaluation—only a little nearer its beginning. *Hamlet* takes for granted that the ethics of revenge are questionable, that ghosts are questionable, that the distinctions of society are questionable, and that the will of heaven is terribly obscure. The higher truth which Hamlet tries to make active in a fallen world belongs to a past which he sees slipping away from him. Shakespeare movingly presents the beauty of a past in which kingship, marriage and the order of society had or was believed to have a heavenly sanction. A brutal Cain-like murder destroys the order of the past. Hamlet struggles to restore the past, and as he does so we feel that the desirability is delicately and perilously balanced against the futility. Shakespeare was by no means eager to share Nietzsche's acquiescence in time's *es war*. This matter of balance is an essential part of our answer about the ending of the play. It is a precarious balance, and perhaps impossible to maintain.

The Elizabethans too doubted ghosts. Shakespeare used the concern of his time about voices and visions to suggest the treacherousness of communication with the transcendent world. We come in the end to accept the Ghost not as a devil but as a spirit who speaks truth yet who cannot with any sufficiency or adequacy provide the answer to Hamlet's cry, 'What should we do?' Everything depends on interpretation and translation. A terrible weight of responsibility is thrown on to the human judgement and will. Kierkegaard, in *Fear and Trembling*, spoke of Abraham hearing a voice from heaven and trusting it to the extent of being willing to kill his own son; and he wrote brilliantly of the knife-edge which divides an act of faith from a demoniacal impulse. In Shakespeare's age, William Tyndale also used Abraham as an example of where faith might go outside the boundaries of ethics, but he warned against 'holy works' which had their source in what he contemptuously called 'man's imaginations'. These distinctions between acts of faith and the demoniacal, between holy works and works of man's imagination, seem fundamental to *Hamlet*. We know that Hamlet made a mess of what he was trying to do. The vital question is whether what he was trying to do was a holy
work or a work of man's imagination. Shakespeare refuses to tell us.

Hamlet's attempt to make a higher truth operative in the world of Denmark, which is where all of us live, is a social and political disaster, and it pushes him into inhumanity and cruelty. But the unanswerable question, 'Is't not to be damned / To let this canker of our nature come / In further evil?', if it could be answered ‘Yes!’ would make us see the chance-medley of the play's ending in a light so different that it would abolish our merely moral judgement. Bradley's final remark on the play was that 'the apparent failure of Hamlet's life is not the ultimate truth concerning him'. But it might be. That is where the tragic balance lies. The play of Hamlet takes place within the possibility that there is a higher court of values than those which operate around us, within the possibility of having some imperfect communication with that court, within the possibility that an act of violence can purify, within the possibility that the words 'salvation' and 'damnation' have meaning. To say that these possibilities are certainties is to wreck the play as surely as to say they are impossibilities.

So the silence of the Ghost at the end of the play leaves the extent of Hamlet's victory or triumph an open question. To answer it needs a knowledge that Horatio didn't have, that Shakespeare didn't have, that we don't have. The mortal havoc is plain to our eyes on the stage; the rest is silence.

Notes

3. 'Des Willens Widerwille gegen die Zeit und ihr “Es war”.'
5. See Prosser, Hamlet and Revenge, pp. 261-75.
7. See the excellent comment by Dover Wilson, What Happens in 'Hamlet', 1935; 3rd edn, 1951, p. 268.
8. The absence of the Ghost at the end, in contrast with The Spanish Tragedy, is noted by H. Levin, The Question of 'Hamlet', 1959, p. 98. A view of the reason for the Ghost's disappearance which is very different from mine is given in two adjoining articles in Shakespeare Survey 30 (1977), by Philip Brockbank (p. 107) and Barbara Everett (p. 118).

Criticism: Character Studies: R.A. Foakes (essay date 1973)


[In the following essay, originally published in 1973, Foakes compares Hamlet to Vindice in The Revenger's Tragedy, contending that “it is the strength of Hamlet, not his weakness ... that he cannot kill, that he fails to carry out his revenge.”]
Hamlet admits to cruelty only when he is about to encounter his mother in the Closet scene, and then he seeks to qualify the term

O heart, lose not thy nature, let not ever
The soul of Nero enter this firm bosom,
Let me be cruel not unnatural.

(iii, ii, 396-8)

The cruelty he seeks to permit himself is to be kept under a restraint, not let loose with the tyrannical savagery of which Nero served as a type. So again, at the end of the interview, Hamlet cries, ‘I must be cruel only to be kind’, claiming that his cruelty serves its opposite, kindness. What Hamlet seems anxious to do here is to prevent himself from inflicting cruelty for its own sake; and the fact that he alone articulates this idea in the play suggests both the measure of success he has in controlling himself, and also his awareness, so to speak, of possibilities for cruelty within himself.

If Hamlet is not at this point recalling the Ghost's speeches to him in act i, his concern about his mother, and the re-appearance of the Ghost in the Closet scene, make the link for spectator and reader. Then the Ghost had ended his account of the murder by exhorting Hamlet to revenge, but warning him too:

Howsomever thou pursues this act,
Taint not thy mind, nor let thy soul contrive
Against thy mother aught …

(i, v, 84-6)

It might be said that Hamlet's mind is already tainted, as the first soliloquy, ‘O that this too too sullied flesh would melt’, has already shown him brooding on suicide and disgusted by the speed of his mother's remarriage with a man he despises; but the Ghost himself may be seen as tainting Hamlet's mind in another way. For the Ghost, like Hamlet in his soliloquy, dwells imaginatively on what has happened in such a way as to emphasise by elaboration what is most gross and nasty. In this the Ghost and Hamlet are alike: what the Ghost speaks may be seen as articulating what is already there in Hamlet. So, like Hamlet, the Ghost dwells on remarriage in language that is itself revolting,

So lust, though to a radiant angel linked,
Will sate itself in a celestial bed
And prey on garbage

(i, v, 54-6)

There is a kind of self-indulgence in this, a relish of nastiness which does not relate to the Claudius and Gertrude we have seen in action. The Ghost continues with his account of the murder:

Upon my secure hour thy uncle stole
With juice of cursed hebenon in a vial,
And in the porches of my ears did pour
The leperous distillment, 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,
And with a sudden vigor it doth posset,
And curd, like eager droppings into milk,
The thin and wholesome blood. So did it mine,
And a most instant tetter barked about,
Most lazarlike, with vile and loathsome crust,
All my smooth body.

(i, v, 61-73)

The Ghost seems fascinated by the details of what happened, and dwells especially on the effects of the poison, producing that ‘tetter’ or eruption which covers his skin with a ‘loathsome crust’; it is this above all that the speech renders with the force of particularity, and which informs that great cry.¹

O, horrible! O, horrible! most horrible!

(i, v, 80)

In other words, the Ghost does not just tell us what happened, but recreates imaginatively how it happened, the horrible atrocity of a murder which could, presumably, have been relatively quick and simple, a stab with a dagger, or smothering with a pillow. A passage from Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* may be helpful at this point, for this is a novel much concerned with the nature of cruelty; at one point in it Ivan tries to explain to Alyosha why he cannot love his neighbours, and this passes into an extraordinary account of human cruelty, in which he tells Alyosha a story:

‘By the way, not so long ago a Bulgarian in Moscow told me’, Ivan went on, as though not bothering to listen to his brother, ‘of the terrible atrocities committed all over Bulgaria by the Turks and Circassians who were afraid of a general uprising of the Slav population. They burn, kill, violate women and children, nail their prisoners’ ears to fences and leave them like that till next morning when they hang them, and so on - it's impossible to imagine it all. And, indeed people sometimes speak of man’s ‘bestial’ cruelty, but this is very unfair and insulting to the beasts: a beast can never be so cruel as a man, so ingeniously, so artistically cruel. A tiger merely gnaws and tears to pieces, that's all he knows. It would never occur to him to nail men's ears to a fence and leave them like that overnight, even if he were able to do it. These Turks, incidentally, seemed to derive a voluptuous pleasure from torturing children, cutting a child out of its mother's womb with a dagger and tossing babies up in the air and catching them on a bayonet before the eyes of their mothers. It was doing it before the eyes of their mothers that made it so enjoyable. But one incident I found particularly interesting. Imagine a baby in the arms of a trembling mother, surrounded by Turks who had just entered her house. They are having great fun: they fondle the baby, they laugh to make it laugh and they are successful: the baby laughs. At that moment the Turk points a pistol four inches from the baby's face. The boy laughs happily, stretches out his little hands to grab the pistol, when suddenly the artist pulls the trigger in the baby's face and blows his brains out … Artistic, isn't it? Incidentally, I'm told the Turks are very fond of sweets.’²

Ivan observes that man is distinguished from beasts by his artistry: we speak casually of ‘bestial’ cruelty, but no animal is as cruel as men can be, who do it for enjoyment and to display their skill as artists, while others, looking on as spectators, take pleasure in watching, and in this case, enjoy the anguish the murder of the baby causes to its mother.

Something of this artistry in cruelty seems to be shown in the murder of old King Hamlet, as the Ghost describes it; the poison chosen by his brother was one that visibly corrupts and makes horrible the body of the dying man. Even the Ghost, who speaks of it as if he had been an onlooker at his own murder, is fascinated by the details of the process of dying, horrible as they are. He says he was sleeping at the time, and so not conscious, but he narrates what happened as if Claudius, in the manner of Dostoevsky's artists in cruelty, had staged it so that old Hamlet would at once suffer and be a spectator at his own death.
The Ghost calls on Hamlet to revenge,

Revenge his foul and most unnatural murder,

(i, v, 25)

and to pursue it by any means so long as he leaves his mother to Heaven. Although the Ghost does not explicitly command him to kill Claudius, this is what, in effect, ‘revenge’ means, since it is the only way Hamlet can obtain satisfaction and repay the injuries received by his father. So Hamlet is required to contrive another killing, a deed ironically condemned in the very next words of the Ghost,

Murder most foul, as in the best it is.

(i, v, 27)

In her study of revenge, Eleanor Prosser ‘found no evidence to indicate that Elizabethans believed the law required blood revenge. The Law was absolute: murder, as such, was never justified.’ The play shows Hamlet to be an artist, an actor-dramatist, ingenious contriver, and player of many parts; the Ghost, even as he condemns murder, demands that he put that artistry into the service of a cruelty Hamlet sees, at any rate in the Closet scene, as potentially there in himself.

This may seem a strange perspective when it is set against that view of Hamlet, which many hold, as a character imbued with a moral idealism or governed by a sense of moral scruple. It has been said, for example, very recently by Ivor Morris, in a careful account of Hamlet, that

Goodness and simple humanity are Hamlet's ideal. More truly than the heroic, it is the moral that confers nobility on man … Human excellence for Hamlet does not imply a self-aggrandizement, but rather the forsaking of an instinctive self-will, and the disciplining of the aspiring consciousness according to values which, though humble and familiar, are yet of a power to transcend. The chief passion of Hamlet's soul, therefore, is the precise antithesis of the heroic.4

Well, yes—but isn't this much too simple and clear-cut? For Hamlet sees his father in an heroic image, and finds a model for himself in Horatio, more an antique Roman than a Dane. It is true that Hamlet disparages himself in saying that Claudius 'is no more like my father than I to Hercules'; yet much of his idealism is bound up with the warrior-figures of the Ghost at the beginning and Fortinbras at the end, so that it is important to notice how these figures are presented in the play.

Some think of the military imagery in the play as being there to ‘emphasise that Claudius and Hamlet are engaged in a duel to the death’,5 or that it exists to call attention ‘to the issues of public life, to the state of the nation’.6 It may serve these purposes, but when the Ghost appears in armour from head to foot, and accompanied by indications of past triumphs, as when he smote the sledged Polacks on the ice, other connotations are at work too; for war here does not, of course, have its unpleasant modern associations, but rather a ring of chivalric heroism in the thought of personal encounters, personal courage and skill. Old Hamlet appears in a ‘fair and warlike form’, as ‘valiant Hamlet’, who, challenged to combat,

Did slay this Fortinbras, who by a sealed compact,  
Well ratified by law and heraldry,  
Did forfeit (with his life) all those his lands  
Which he stood seized of, to the conqueror.

(i, i, 86-9)
The word ‘heraldry’, referring vaguely to heraldic practice, suggests an almost medieval ceremony, an ancient practice, no longer meaningful in the new Denmark of Claudius, the modern politician, negotiating through ambassadors. Later on Hamlet sees another image of chivalric heroism in that ‘delicate and tender prince’, young Fortinbras, passing through on his way, like old Hamlet, to fight the Poles, merely for honour, and driven by a ‘divine ambition’. It is enough to make him give Fortinbras his dying vote for the succession to the Danish throne.

Hamlet in this combines a nostalgia for a past that seems better than the present with the idea of a great soldier as simple, good and truthful. An audience sees also that Fortinbras is wasting his country's youth on a trivial and useless campaign; and if the Ghost really represents Old Hamlet, then he was also vindictive and morally perverse, condemning all murder, yet urging Hamlet to commit one. Hamlet's image is a partial one; Fortinbras and his father take on in his mind's eye grander proportions and finer qualities than are evidenced in the play, and Claudius appears worse to him than he does in the action:

So excellent a King, that was to this
Hyperion to a satyr,

(i, ii, 140-1)

the sun-god compared with one who is half-beast. The heroic ideal Hamlet thinks he sees in his father merges into those classical figures that spring to his lips for a comparison, Hyperion, Mars, Mercury, Caesar, Hercules, Aeneas, and others, and all help to suggest imagined models for Hamlet himself, and to exemplify to him that possibility of the godlike in man embodied in ‘What a piece of work is a man!’ Hamlet tends to disclaim comparison between himself and his heroes, yet there is much of the heroic in him too, complicated by other qualities, as he is more fully of the Renaissance, a man of all talents and so much less the mere warrior-hero. Trained at a university, he retains the habit of sifting evidence, even the habit of taking lecture-notes (‘My tables, meet it is I set it down’). He writes more than other Shakespearian protagonists; King Lear could have been illiterate, but Hamlet is clearly an intellectual, au fait with classical literature, able to turn off a few lines for Ophelia, however much he is ‘ill at these numbers’, and to pen a speech for the players, a dozen or so lines of verse. Hamlet the writer reflects Hamlet the thinker and scholar, but he is also an accomplished swordsman, who throughout conveys a sense of absolute fearlessness, so that at the end it seems entirely appropriate when he is accorded martial honours, as four captains bear his body, ‘like a soldier’ to the stage.

Hamlet is a very complex character, and it won't do to say that ‘goodness and simple humanity are Hamlet's ideal’. Insofar as he locates his ideal in his father and Fortinbras, it seems to be partly a longing for a simpler world, in which problems could be honourably settled in combat; and it is based on an uncritical association of these figures with a chivalric heroism. Hamlet's idealism is confused, and this confusion prevents him from seeing at once the contradiction in the Ghost's exhortations to him to do the very thing for which the Ghost condemns Claudius. Hamlet shows at times a moral delicacy and scrupulousness that mark him off from the world of Claudius, and this is brought out by the comparison with Laertes sweeping unhesitatingly to his revenge; but he is confused in his moral stances too, and fails to discipline his consciousness, or to remain, as Ivor Morris claims, ‘morally consistent’. He does not directly question the Ghost's command, although he avoids pursuing it, and has recourse to play-acting, to an antic disposition, and to the play within the play. Some see this as a substitute for real action, for killing Claudius, and put emphasis on Hamlet's delay, but it is as much a device to penetrate the mask of Claudius in order to discover his true nature and to expose his guilt. Beyond this it is also, more importantly, a means to accommodate himself to what he feels he has to do; the Ghost has emphasised in detail the horror of the murder of his father, and in order to accomplish his revenge, he needs to act like Claudius, and face a similar horror.
In the course of the play he makes a series of moral adjustments, notably after he stabs Polonius through the arras, and so marks himself with a blood-guilt. He assigns the responsibility for this to ‘heaven’, as if he has been appointed a divine agent:

For this same lord
I do repent; but heaven hath pleas’d it so
To punish me with this, and this with me,
That I must be their scourge and minister.

(iii, iv, 172-5)

The terms ‘scourge’ and ‘minister’, it seems, ‘are so contradictory that they are irreconcilable’, for ‘God elects as his scourge only a sinner who already deserves damnation’, while a ‘minister’ would be a true agent and servant of God. Hamlet could not be both at the same time, and the moral confusion present here is brought out further in his recognition in the same speech that, ‘This bad begins, and worse remains behind.’ This confusion is marked too in the way he seems to convince himself after his return from the sea-voyage in act v that it would be ‘perfect conscience’ to kill Claudius:

Does it not, think thee, stand me now upon—
He that hath kill’d my king and whor’d my mother,
Popp’d in between th’ election and my hopes,
Thrown out his angle for my proper life,
And with such cozenage—is't not perfect conscience
To quit him with this arm? And is't not to be damned
To let this canker of our nature come
In further evil?

(v, ii, 63-70)

Though Claudius has done these things, including the attempt to have Hamlet done to death by sending him to England bearing a commission for his own execution, Hamlet is not thereby given moral freedom to kill Claudius, to practise murder most foul, ‘as in the best it is’.

In fact his claims that heaven has appointed him as its agent, and that he would be damned for not killing Claudius, do not issue in any determined action. Hamlet might be interpreted here as cheering himself up; whatever he says, he still does nothing, and rather at the end resigns himself to providence. However much he may justify murder to himself, there is no sign that he can bring himself in action to face the horror of doing it. After the encounter with the Ghost in act i, Hamlet cries out that the commandment to revenge shall alone live in his mind, but what he does is to adopt that ‘antic disposition’, which allows him to play any part, notably those of fool and madman. The Ghost’s commandment brings out the artist in Hamlet, his concern with play-action, which is stimulated too by the entry of the players, and Shakespeare focuses our attention on these through much of acts ii and iii. When Hamlet first meets the players, he asks for a speech, recalling the opening of it himself: ‘twas Aeneas’ tale to Dido, and thereabout of it especially where he speaks of Priam’s slaughter’. It is appropriate for him to have remembered this speech from a play that was ‘caviare to the general’, a play for the educated, based on Virgil’s Aeneid, and so associated with that heroic world with which Hamlet likes to link himself, and which emerges especially in references to and images drawn from classical history, literature and myth. As has been skilfully shown by Nigel Alexander, the player’s speech also provides subtle analogies for Hamlet, as it acts out the successful vengeance of Pyrrhus upon Priam, and the destruction of a kingdom brought about by lust.

But the speech has another kind of significance which I want to emphasise; it describes Pyrrhus raging through the streets of Troy to revenge the death of his father, until eventually he finds and hacks to pieces the aged and defenceless Priam:
Now is he total gules, horridly trick'd
With blood of fathers, mothers, daughters, sons,
Bak'd and impasted with the parching streets,
That lend a tyrannous and a damned light
To their lord's murder. Roasted in wrath and fire,
And thus o'er-sized with coagulate gore,
With eyes like carbuncles, the hellish Pyrrhus
Old grandsire Priam seeks.'

(ii, ii, 460-8)

The language of this is inflated, but not too much so for its content and occasion, and the overall impression it makes is powerful. Of its kind, it is a good speech, vigorously presenting an image of Pyrrhus as literally covered in blood that is dried and baked on to him, so that he is 'impasted' or encrusted with it, through the heat generated by his anger ('roasted in wrath'), and slaughters fathers, mothers and sons at random. In other words, Pyrrhus images an ultimate in cruelty, beyond all control, and exemplifies the kind of pleasure in atrocity which Dostoevsky observes, as he goes on to make 'malicious sport' in mincing Priam before the eyes of Hecuba. If it is a reminder to Hamlet of what he feels he must do, it recalls also the Ghost's account of his murder, when the poison Claudius administered caused his skin to become covered with a 'vile and loathsome crust'. Like the Ghost's speech, this one dwells on the particularities of the event, recreating imaginatively the horror of it, and like that, it wins for a moment Hamlet's wholehearted involvement. In each case, however, the horror of the deed is made bearable to Hamlet through its presentation in art, in a kind of play within the play, where it is aesthetically distanced.11 The point I would make about these scenes, is that they show how Hamlet can involve himself imaginatively in play-acting or dramatising the act of cruelty, but cannot do it. Briefly now he whips himself into a heat of passion:

Is it not monstrous that this player here,
But in a fiction, in a dream of passion,
Could force his soul so to his own conceit,
That from her working all his visage wanned,
Tears in his eyes, distraction in his aspect,
A broken voice, and his whole function suiting
With forms to his conceit; and all for nothing?

(ii, ii, 554-60)

In fact, it is the fiction or art that makes it possible for Hamlet to face this image of cruel murder, and it provokes him not into acting like Pyrrhus, but into arranging a performance of another play, the murder of Gonzago.

It is not 'monstrous' to 'force the soul' to display the imagined passion; it would be monstrous rather to put that passion to work in earnest. Again Hamlet's moral confusion emerges, as he forces his own soul into a rage and unpacks his heart with words in this soliloquy. For Hamlet's moral idealism emerges not in what he tries to will himself to do, which is to abandon scruple and drive to his revenge (consciously, so to speak, this is what he thinks he is doing, as is evidenced in his confusions or rejections of morality); it is revealed rather in the energy with which he can respond to or recreate the horror imaginatively. In this the aesthetic passes into the moral; he confronts the image of what, on one level, he would like to make himself, at such a pitch of imaginative intensity, that it disables him from practising cruelty himself. His full imaginative involvement brings home to him and us the horror of what Claudius did, and of the carnage wrought by the 'hellish Pyrrhus'; so, even when he has a perfect opportunity, finding Claudius at prayer, Hamlet cannot do it, and neglects the chance to kill him. The reasons he gives have some plausibility, but behind them we sense his radical inability to become 'monstrous' or 'hellish' in deed, and carry out a willed murder.
When he does kill, it is in a fit of excitement, and an unpremeditated act, stabbing blindly through the arras, not a planned murder. The death of Polonius fastens a guilt on him, and makes it easier for him to send Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to their deaths by forging a new commission to the King of England. Even this, though ingenious, is not a direct deed of cruelty, and on his return to Denmark, it is in a condition of resignation: '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.' He appears to be talking about his own death—but he is talking also about the death of Claudius—for he abandons plotting, the thought of acting as revenger, of being a Pyrrhus; and the death of Claudius happens in a muddle at the end, and only after Hamlet has his own death-wound. Horatio speaks with reason here

Of accidental judgments, casual slaughters,
Of deaths put on by cunning and forced cause,
And, in this upshot, purposes mistook,
Fallen on the inventors' heads.

(v, ii, 380-3)

It is all clumsy, casual and, on the part of Hamlet, unplanned and unprepared—he never does become a revenger, unless he might be thought one in that moment when, having given Claudius his death-wound with a venomed sword, he then forces him to drink the poisoned wine. Its effect, however, is to despatch Claudius at once, not to protract his death, or make it more horrible, and Laertes guides our response:

He is justly serv:

It is a poison tempered by himself.

(v, ii, 325-6)

Hamlet shows a kind of cruelty twice in the play, once when he turns on Ophelia, recognising that she is a decoy, and later when he speaks savagely to his mother. He lashes verbally the two women he loves, and his behaviour here is not, as is sometimes argued, merely a reflection of his revulsion against sex, or of his hatred of the corruption he sees around him; it relates also, and more deeply, to his imaginative engagement with, and recoil from, the horror within himself. The cruelty expressed in words is also a substitute for action, an outlet for what he knows is in him, and might perhaps be seen too as vicariously satisfying the conscious urge to drive himself to a deed of cruelty, to revenge. His attack on Ophelia springs from an inquisition into himself, beginning in the soliloquy ‘To be or not to be’, in which, amongst other things, a dejected Hamlet attempts to reckon with the need for action, the task of taking arms against Claudius, in the recognition that ‘the pale cast of thought’ is inimical to action; the self-inspection deepens into the hyperbole of his words to Ophelia:

I am very proud, revengeful, ambitious, with more offences at my beck than I have thoughts to put them in, imagination to give them shape, or time to act them in.

(iii, i, 125)

He has a sense of a potential in himself for unimagined, or unimaginable offences, but those we are aware of in him exist mostly in his mind or imagination. So when he confronts his mother in the Closet scene, it is to recreate in imagination, and with a nastiness belonging to his conception, to him more than to the deed itself, the activity of sexual relations between Claudius and his mother:

Nay, but to live

In the rank sweat of an enseamed bed,
Stewed in corruption, honeying, and making love
Over the nasty sty ...
The obscenity is inside Hamlet, and bursts out in a savagery of words; if these help to bring Ophelia to suicide, and afflict Gertrude so that she cries

These words like daggers enter in mine ears,

nevertheless, these attacks are essentially different from the deed this line recalls, Claudius pouring poison into the ears of Old Hamlet. Ophelia cannot comprehend what Hamlet says, and both she and, initially at any rate, Gertrude, are inclined to think his outbursts are expressions of madness. I think rather that Hamlet gives rein to his tongue as an alternative to the action he cannot face; and his ability to give bitterness vent in words to them, and yet refrain from a willed or planned killing, is exactly what we might expect.

The presentation of Hamlet in this way is worth comparing to that of Vindice in The Revenger’s Tragedy, who is also something of an artist, and likes to see himself as dramaturge, even as writer of his own play. Even in the opening speech over the skull, he already uses it as a stage-property in his own dramatisation of the court, and when he is not playing the disguised roles of Piato and a malcontent, adopted to deceive Lussurioso, he is to be found stage-managing playlets of his own, most notably in the famous scene in which the skull is again introduced, now dressed in ‘tires’, fitted with a head-dress as if alive. As he brings it on, Vindice uses it consciously again as a property, saying to Hippolito;

Now to my tragic business, look you, brother,
I have not fashioned this only for show,
And useless property; no it shall bear a part
E'en in its own revenge …

The skull itself is a reminder of Hamlet in the graveyard, but though Hamlet plays many parts, and fancies himself as an actor with the visiting company in Elsinore, there is a radical difference, namely that Hamlet is wholly involved in the decision whether to revenge, in those questions to do or not to do (‘Now might I do it part…’), and to be or not to be, that reverberate in the play; but Vindice has made his decision already before his opening speech; his attention is engaged by the question, ‘How can I effect my revenge in the cleverest way?’ not, ‘How can I do it at all?’ Because his attention is on the means rather than the end, he becomes pleased with his own cleverness, designing the little play within the play in which he murders the Duke.

While Hamlet is concerned with the nature of revenge and the horror of the act of cruelty, we see in Vindice a growing detachment from the nature of what he is doing, a detachment which is made to take effect fully as part of the play’s serious action. At the beginning, his moral indignation at the corruptions of the court invites our sympathy and assent. In the opening scene, his independence from the court is imaged in the visual separation of Vindice from the procession he watches and describes, but by act iii, when he contrives the murder of the Duke, he has taken his place among the courtiers, and joins those he so despised at first, crying

'Tis state in music for a Duke to bleed.
The dukedom wants a head, tho' yet unknown.
As fast as they peep up, let's cut 'em down.
Vindice's anger at the beginning is justified insofar as he is in a position similar to that of Hamlet, unable to obtain justice for a murder in a court which seems corrupt; but when Vindice uses the skull to poison the Duke in act iii, Hippolito applauds him not for a moral achievement, but more appropriately for his cleverness:

I do applaud thy constant vengeance,
The quaintness of thy malice.

(iii, v, 108-9)

It is an ingenuity (‘quaintness’), an artistry, put into the service of ‘malice’, of cruelty, as Vindice enjoys poisoning the Duke in a kiss even while he watches his own wife and bastard son making love.

It is their self-satisfaction in their skill which leads Vindice and Hippolito to boast at the end of their ‘wit’ in murdering the Duke, and so brings on their arrest and execution. By act v, their enjoyment in plotting has reached the point where they congratulate each other on watching an innocent nobleman carried off to execution suspected of a murder they have carried out:

Hippolito.
Brother, how happy is our vengeance!
Vindice. Why,
it hits
Past th' apprehension of indifferent wits.

(v, ii, 133-4)

In relation to this delight in cruelty, it is important to notice how much of the play is funny; its general cleverness emerges in a kind of grisly humour, as in the joking of the Duchess's youngest son as he expects release from the scaffold, a release which never comes, or in the hiring of Vindice by Lussurioso to kill his alter ego, Piato; or in the double masque of revengers at the end. In spite of the burning moral indignation of some of Vindice's speeches, the world of the play offers an image of human existence which excludes the possibility of the heroic and moral idealism present in Hamlet; it is a world in which money, power, and sex dominate, and for Vindice, intelligence and artistry replace morality. The humour is necessary to make such a vision of human cruelty through ingenuity bearable. At the same time, the play shows in Vindice an ‘artist’, the stage-manager and writer of his own playlets, becoming so absorbed in his skill that he treats life merely as an exercise for his art, and so loses all moral sense. When he confronts his mother in act iv, it is not to threaten her with words like daggers (compare Hamlet's, ‘I will speak daggers to her, but use none’), but to hold a real dagger to her breast, so that when she echoes Gertrude's ‘Thou wilt not murder me’, it is with a difference: Gratiana asks, ‘What, will you murder me?’ and there seems every reason to suppose Vindice and Hippolito may do so.

To return then to Hamlet: there is one moment in the play when Hamlet, like Vindice, yields to a sense of pleasure in the skill of plotting:

Hoist with his own petar, and't shall go hard
But I will delve one yard below their mines,
And blow them at the moon: O, 'tis most sweet
When in one line two crafts directly meet.

(iii, iv, 206-10)

This occurs after the death of Polonius, and when he learns he must go to England; but in fact, Hamlet practises craft in this way only once. All his artistry in the first part of the play is aimed at understanding
himself and making apparent the guilt of Claudius; he stabs Polonius in a fit of passion, and not knowing what or who is behind the arras; and at the end he declines to plot against Claudius, putting his trust in providence. Only once, in the boat to England, is he prompted to try his craft, when he alters the message Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are carrying to avoid his own death. There is no instance at all of Hamlet initiating a plot to kill anyone.

Although he is as much of an artist as Vindice, Hamlet does not confuse art and life; indeed, he has his theory of the art of playing, and his famous formulation is worth noting: ‘whose end both at the first, and now, was and is, to hold as ’twere the mirror up to nature, to show virtue her own feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure’ (iii, ii, 20). The ‘end’ or aim of art is to reflect what is there, and presumably by reflecting, to reveal to him what the spectator may not otherwise see; but its success in doing this depends on the apprehension of the spectator, as Vindice knew, on his sensitivity and understanding, and Hamlet's theory says nothing of his. It does not work too well for Claudius; the play within the play shows twice, first in dumb-show and then in action, something closely resembling the murder of old Hamlet, and Claudius is not much troubled by this mirror held up to nature; what does seem to stir him is Hamlet's identification of the murderer as ‘one Lucianus, nephew to the King’, and a few lines later, Claudius walks out, calling for lights, and ‘marvellous distempered’. What he saw acted before him was not the murder of Old Hamlet so much as an image of a secret fear, the killing of himself by his nephew, Young Hamlet.

The theory works better for Hamlet himself: the play within the play seems to him to mirror Claudius's deed, and to cause him to reveal his guilt; in addition, it provides yet one more artistic expression of the nature of that murder, which is also reflected in the Ghost's speech, and in the First Player's speech on the ‘hellish Pyrrhus’. Hamlet's playing dwells on the image of a murder which reflects the cruelty of the deed and the horror of revenge; and so reveals to us what is not apparent to Hamlet himself, his moral revulsion from the task he feels the Ghost has imposed on him. This fascinated loathing of the horror in its imagined recreation finds one more outlet in the Graveyard scene, when he broods on the skull of Yorick, and after drawing out the commonplaces appropriate to that memento mori, passes on to Alexander, another classical hero:

Hamlet. Now get you to my lady's chamber, and tell her, let her paint an inch thick, to this favour she must come, make her laugh at that ... Prithee Horatio, tell me one thing.
Horatio. What's that, my lord?
Hamlet. Dost thou think Alexander looked o'this fashion i'th' earth?
Horatio. E'en so.
Hamlet. And smelt so? pah!
Horatio. E'en so, my lord.
Hamlet. To what base uses we may return, Horatio!
Why may not imagination trace the noble dust of Alexander till'a find it stopping a bung-hole?
Horatio. 'Twere to consider too curiously, to consider so.

(v, i, 187-200)

Why may not imagination trace the dust of Alexander in this way? Horatio's answer carries weight—because it is to speculate too nicely, to go too far, to become, he might have added, self-indulgent; but there are more things in heaven and earth than Horatio sees, and his response is a limited one; Hamlet's effort to trace in imagination the full consequences of physical decay in death parallels his ability to face imaginatively the full horror of revenge; the element of indulgence in both is less significant than the power they have to work as vehicles of Hamlet's deepest moral awareness; he is right to reply here to Horatio's ‘‘Twere to consider too curiously’ with the phrase ‘No, faith, not a jot!’
The greatness of Hamlet may be measured against the more limited, if splendid, achievement of The
Revenger’s Tragedy, in which Vindice so falls in love with his art as to commit himself entirely to it. Unable
then to see its moral implications for himself, he uses it, most notably in his device with the skull, as a means
to effect his revenge; so, becoming like Dostoevsky’s Turks, he enjoys the display of cruelty as he makes the
dying Duke watch the incestuous adultery of his own wife. By contrast, it is the strength of Hamlet, not his
weakness, or only superficially his weakness, that he cannot kill, that he fails to carry out his revenge. The
role of Hamlet may be seen as ironically expanding from his opening lines, when he enters acting like a
mourner in his customary suits of solemn black, and saying,

For they are actions that a man might play,
But I have that within which passeth show
(i, ii, 83-5)

In the action Hamlet does, in fact, reveal what is most deep within him, not, so to speak, consciously, not even
in the soliloquies, but in projecting imaginatively, into art, into shows, into plays within the play, or the
rhetoric of his encounters with Ophelia and Gertrude, a sense of the potential for cruelty and viciousness in
himself. Shakespeare makes this art the vehicle of the moral restraint Hamlet exercises upon what is within.
The combination of his full imaginative grasp of the horror of a cruelty he recognises as potentially in himself,
with a moral revulsion from it of which he is unconscious, or at best obscurely aware, perhaps helps to explain
why Hamlet remains both an enigma and Shakespeare's best-loved hero.

Notes

1. This line functions too in relation to the idea immediately preceding it, of dying, ‘With all my
   imperfections on my head’, and that following in the reference to ‘luxury and damned incest’, but it
   seems to me to carry most weight as a rhetorical climax to the account of the murder as a whole.
2. The quotation is from the translation by David Magarshack (Harmondsworth, 1958), i, 278-9.
   measure provoked the present essay.
9. The quotations are from Eleanor Prosser's analysis of this passage in Hamlet and Revenge, pp.
   199-201.
11. In Shakespeare the Craftsman (London, 1969), p. 129, M.C. Bradbrook has argued that the First
    Player here was made up to look like Burbage playing Hamlet, so that during the Pyrrhus speech
    Hamlet was watching, as it were, a reflection of himself.

Criticism: Character Studies: Eric P. Levy (essay date 1999)

SOURCE: “‘Nor th’ exterior nor the inward man’: The Problematics of Personal Identity in Hamlet,” in

[In the following essay, Levy charts Hamlet’s probing of the nature of human identity and argues that the play
conceptualizes an alternative to the usual inward/outward polarity.]
Hamlet begins with an urgent questioning of identity: ‘Who’s there?’ A similar query is soon directed at the Ghost: ‘What art thou that usurp’st this time of night’ (1.1.49). The interrogation is complicated by the very nature of the problem. For identity in this context is not simple but polar. That is, it comprises a totality whose two aspects are public and private or what Claudius terms ‘th’exterior’ and ‘the inward man’ (2.2.4). Therefore, if the question of identity is to be answered at the most fundamental level, the proper relation of the inward and outward dimensions of identity must first be determined. As we shall find, Hamlet profoundly critiques prevailing assumptions regarding this relation, and dramatizes an alternate conceptualization of human identity: ‘what is a man’ (4.4.33).

According to the conventional schema, inward and outward are construed as reciprocal modes of the same totality. In Hegel's succinct enunciation of this traditional schema, inward pertains to ‘essence’ or ‘identity with self’; outward pertains to ‘appearance’ or ‘what is manifested.’ In ideal configuration, ‘[t]he appearance shows nothing that is not the essence, and in the essence there is nothing but what is manifested’ (179). A medieval example of such agreement occurs in Abbot Suger's (d. 1151) celebrated description of the clergy assembled for the consecration of the Parisian basilica of St Denis: ‘their outward apparel and attire indicated the inward intention of their mind and body’ (113).

Implicit in this schema is the assumption that inwardness has privileged and unerring access to its own content. That is, just as outward, as a public manifestation, is by definition perceptible by others, so inward, as a private experience, is by definition uniquely perceptible by the subject to which it pertains. Gilbert Ryle elaborates: ‘Only I can take direct cognizance of the status and processes of my own mind’ (11). In other words, private confirmation of inward content is deemed analogous to public confirmation of outward content. The essential differences between them concern location and access. Public objects are situated in the world or the body, and can be perceived by any appropriately placed observer; private objects are situated ‘in the mind’ (Hamlet 3.1.57), and can be perceived only by that mind. Indeed, Hamlet invokes this assumption when distinguishing between outward display and inward feeling: ‘But I have that within which passes show, / These but the trappings and the suits of woe’ (1.2.85-86). Here, the private object (in this case, his own grief) is assigned a certainty of existence equivalent to that enjoyed by public objects. In fact, Katherine Eisaman Maus even claims that, in this example, the private object enjoys superior certainty: ‘For Hamlet the internal experience of his own grief “passes show” in two senses. It is beyond scrutiny, concealed where other people cannot perceive it. And it surpasses the visible—its validity is unimpeachable’ (4; original emphasis).

THE CRITIQUE OF INWARDNESS

But Maus's claim regarding the primacy of inwardness is undermined in the world of the play, where the private object (that of which inwardness is aware) is notoriously problematic and in need of outward verification. Relevant examples include Polonius forgetting his own train of thought (‘what was I about / to say?’ [2.1.50-51]), and Ophelia uncertain of her own awareness, both before her madness (‘I do not know, my lord, what I should think’ [1.3.104]) and during it: ‘Indeed would make one think there might be thought, / Though nothing sure …’ (4.5.12-13). With respect to inwardness, Hamlet questions his own courage (‘Am I a coward?’ 2.2.566), and doubts whether commitment to his own purpose is really there, in the womb of interiority, when no outward action—not even verbal—to fulfil it is performed: ‘Like a John-a-dreams, unpregnant of my cause’ (2.2.563). Without external corroboration, there is no distinction between false and valid claims concerning inwardness. In these circumstances, the content of inwardness becomes radically problematic. An extreme example of this predicament concerns Hamlet's inventory of ‘that within which passes show’: ‘I am very proud, revengeful, ambitious, with more offenses at my beck than I have thoughts to put them in, imagination to give them shape, or time to act them in’ (3.1.124-127). Here inwardness excludes all outwardness—even the acts of awareness (such as thought and imagination) by which interiority is expressed. Yet, in this situation, statements about inwardness are no more than empty attributions, with no
possibility of either verification or refutation.  

The problem of inward verification can be clarified by reference to the critique of inwardness developed by Wittgenstein and the Oxford philosophers of ordinary language. The primary conclusion of this school is that, without outward criteria, we can never know what another person is experiencing, because we can never know what we ourselves are experiencing. To pursue the implications of this extraordinary conclusion, we must first clarify the concept of knowledge on which it is based.

Explication can begin with Socrates, for whom knowledge implies infallibility (Plato, *Theaetetus* 152c). Otherwise, it would not be knowledge but error. Hence, perception of external objects cannot yield genuine knowledge, since the perceiver is always subject to fluctuation: ‘Are you not sure that it [that which is perceived] does not even appear the same to yourself, because you never remain in the same condition?’ (*Theaetetus* 154a). Though without acknowledging the similarity, Wittgenstein applies a variation of this argument to the notion of the private object (that which exists only in experience of the inward man). There can be no knowledge of the private object (e.g., pain), because in this context, there is no criterion by which truth and falsehood, accuracy and error, can be distinguished. The point here is not that there are no inward feelings, but that statements regarding them are incorrigible; that is, they cannot be verified by any objectively valid principle of verification, and hence are subject to no evaluation of correctness (Malcolm, ‘Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations,*’ 101).

If the subject alone has access to his own feelings, by what criterion can the accuracy of his own perceptions or reports concerning them be verified? That is, how can the content of inwardness be validated? In Wittgenstein's epigram, ‘An “inner process” stands in need of outward criteria’ (i.e. standards of measurement and identification which are independent of their referents) (*Philosophical Investigations*, 580). Indeed, Hamlet himself refers to the need for outward criteria in order to prove that his perception of the Ghost in Gertrude's closet was not merely an inward process or private object: ‘Bring me to the test / And I the matter will reword, which madness would gambol from’ (3.4.144-46). Wittgenstein epitomizes the problem of inwardness in an example: ‘Always get rid of the idea of the private object in this way: assume that it constantly changes, but that you do not notice the change because your memory constantly deceives you’ (*Philosophical Investigations*, 207e). To reformulate this problem in the language of the play, what if, unknown to the subject, the same private object ('that within which passes show') changes its appearance (or magnitude, intensity, etc.) according to the mood or condition of the subject perceiving it—just as the same cloud ‘seems’ (1.2.76) spontaneously to change shape ('camel,' ‘weasel,’ and ‘whale’ [3.2.368, 370, 372]), according to Hamlet's shifting perceptions of it?

The consequences of this problem are profound. To begin with, the assumption that knowledge of others is derived from analogy with oneself must be abandoned. For if, in oneself, it is impossible to verify objectively whether a given sensation or feeling is the same as that felt at some period in the past, then a fortiori it is impossible to determine whether what someone else feels is the same as that which one feels oneself. In the realm of privacy, there is no criterion for correct use of the term ‘same’—whether in reference to oneself or another. Thus, to borrow Norman Malcolm's phrasing, ‘the illusion of the priority of [one's] own case’ is exploded, together with ‘the mistaken assumption that one learns from one's own case what thinking, feeling, sensation are’ (‘Knowledge of Other Minds,’ 380, 378; original emphasis). Hence, first-person experience is no longer valid as the paradigm in terms of which third-person experience is explained.

But without this paradigm, how is knowledge of other minds possible, or, to put the question less formally, how can the privacy of one individual be interpreted and made intelligible to another? For as Justus Hartnack indicates, ‘[t]he belief that states of mind or mental events are experienced by others is an inference based on analogy from one's own inner experience’ (111). A pertinent version of this inference occurs in Plato's *Gorgias*: ‘if mankind did not share one common emotion which was the same though varying in its different manifestations, but some of us experienced peculiar feelings unshared by the rest, it would not be easy for one
of us to reveal his feelings to another’ (481c).

According to this critique of inwardsness, the only adequate criterion of verification regarding the private object is outward behaviour. The ‘I’ is not in a better position than others to confirm statements about his or her innermost processes, because verification requires an invariable criterion, not one that is itself an inward process whose variation might not be noticed by the subject applying it. To adopt Ryle's formulation, the subject does not enjoy ‘Privileged Access to the so-called springs of his own actions’ (91). Hence, as Terence Penelhum indicates, properly to attribute traits to character is ‘to refer not to private episodes, but to dispositions which manifest themselves in predominantly public performances’ (227). It is to posit, not properties independent of expression, but what Place terms ‘capacities, tendencies … to behave in a certain way … if certain circumstances were to arise’ (211).

THE CRITIQUE OF OUTWARDNESS

As we have seen, the primacy of inwardsness is problematized by the need for outward confirmation of its content. But outward verification of inwardsness is itself notoriously problematized in the world of the play, where the exterior man functions as an actor or ‘player’ (2.2.545) whose role and character are contrived by the inward man in order to manipulate the response of the ‘audience’ (5.2.340): ‘Tis too much prov’d, that with devotion's visage / And pious action we do sugar o'er / The devil himself’ (3.1.47-49); ‘one may smile, and smile, and be a villain’ (1.5.108); ‘A face without a heart’ (4.7.108). Hence, outwardness is now associated with the concealment or shamming of inwardsness, while inwardsness is associated with the manipulation of outwardness. Indeed, much of the action in Hamlet concerns the elaborate strategies by which one party attempts to hide, behind a false exterior, its own attempt to probe behind the presumably false exterior of another. For example, Polonius and Claudius hide behind an arras in order to detect the inward cause of Hamlet's madness, which, in turn, is but an outward simulation designed to enable Hamlet to probe the inward secret of Claudius.

This situation epitomizes the notorious discord between inward and outward during the Renaissance. According to Maus, the period 'produces a distinctive way of thinking about human subjectivity that emphasizes the disparity between what a person is and what he or she seems to be to other people' (210). According to Stephen Greenblatt, 'in the sixteenth century there appears to be an increased self-consciousness about the fashioning of human identity as a manipulable, artful process' (2). The locus classicus of Renaissance preoccupation with self-presentation is, of course, Castiglione's The Book of the Courtier (completed in 1516), where the ideal of the gentleman is the sprezzatura or nonchalance that enables him ‘to conceal all art and make whatever is done and said appear to be without effort and without almost any thought about it’ (43). The obverse of this emphasis on self-presentation is suspicion concerning authenticity. For outward is now associated with the concealment of inward.

Yet the reliability of outward expression as a criterion of inward verification is problematized, not only by deliberate manipulation undertaken for personal advantage, but also by mandatory conventions governing outward presentation. Indeed, the opening dialogue foregrounds such conventions: ‘Who's there?’ / ‘Nay, answer me. Stand and unfold yourself’ (1.1.1-2). Here, knowledge of identity follows not from direct expression of private feeling (as when Francisco, after dismissal, refers to feeling ‘sick at heart’) but from outward behaviour modelled according to performative convention (1.1.9). That is, the guard confirms his identity not by outward expression of his inward state, but by a password whose utterance presupposes a shared ‘custom’ of usage: ‘Long live the King!’ (1.4.15; 1.1.3).

THE THEATRICAL MORALITY

But the watchmen are not the only figures expected to adhere to performative convention. According to the dominant morality in the world of the play, when certain external circumstances are present, an appropriate
state of inwardness must be prominently indicated by the appropriate outward behaviour. If a character does
not display the expected emotion in response to these external circumstances, he risks disgracing his ‘honour’
(5.2.242, 244). For, as the most coveted of possessions, honour is primarily a measure of ‘performance’
(4.7.150) or ‘showing’ (5.2.108), and hence can be gained only through appropriate public ‘behaviour’
(2.1.4)—to adopt a term introduced by Polonius, who uses it in the contrary sense: to indicate the actions
which Laertes would not want his father to see, lest his own ‘dishonour’ (2.1.21, 27) result. But in obeying the
imperative regarding appropriate emotional display, each consigns ‘the inward man’ to an inconsolable
isolation by ensuring that ‘th'eterior’ man—the self presented to others—is seen, by those constituting the
audience, to act according to their moral specifications, evincing only those thoughts and feelings deemed
suitable to the situation.

An unexpectedly apt account of the theatrical imperative appears in T.S. Eliot’s celebrated—but by now
antiquated—essay ‘Hamlet’ (1919). There Eliot develops the notion of the ‘objective correlative,’ wherein the
inward emotion expressed by a character must be correlated with external elements evoking it: ‘in other
words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events … shall be the formula of that particular emotion; such
that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is
immediately evoked’ (145). Hamlet unwittingly cites the objective correlative when comparing the Player's
emotional performance with his own shameful reticence: ‘What would he do / Had he the motive and the cue
for passion / That I have? He would drown the stage with tears, / And cleave the general ear with horrid
speech …’ (2.2.554-60).

Of course, Hamlet is unaware here of the deeper implications of his own query. But in spontaneously
proposing this hypothetical case, where a professional actor exploits his skill to express emotions that for him
are compellingly real, Hamlet unknowingly critiques the theatrical imperative, as brief analysis shows. His
assumption that sincerity enhances the public expression of feeling presupposes another: that one is already
adept at feigning what he does not feel. The primary requirement is to be an actor, ‘[t]h'e exterior of all
observers’ (3.1.156)—someone, that is, skilled at simulating the emotions deemed appropriate to the
‘situation’ or ‘chain of events.’ In a world where the suddenly sincere Player is the ‘paragon’ (2.2.307) of the
behaviour appropriate to the situation in which Hamlet now finds himself, sincerity has no place. For it can no
longer be distinguished from its contrary, false show or deception. Whether the individual actually feels the
passion he displays is irrelevant because unverifiable. Similarly, were the Player abruptly to intensify his
acting during a performance, the audience could not tell whether the change were due to a spasm of sincerity
or simply a surge of professional talent.

In a world where the suddenly sincere Player is the ideal—‘the card and calendar of gentry’—to be oneself is
to be a public likeness or ‘semblable’ (5.2.119-20, 118) of oneself, whether the emotions expressed by speech
and action are sincere or not. For to be oneself is to be construed and evaluated in terms of expectations and
criteria regarding exterior self-presentation—just as we found earlier with respect to the sentries standing
‘watch’ on the ‘platform’ (1.2.197, 214). But as a result of the requirement regarding outward ‘showing’
(5.2.108), the inward man is denied the power of expression, just like the dead: ‘That skull had a tongue in it,
and could sing once’ (5.1.74).

The predicament of identity uncovered thus far in the world of the play can now be recapitulated. On the one
hand, inwardness requires outward expression for verification. Without external ‘showing’ (5.2.108), the
existence of an inward trait (‘that within which passes show’ [1.2.85]) is no more certain than is the existence
of the Ghost without corroboration by multiple witnesses. On the other hand, outward expression—the
necessary criterion by which inwardness is verified—is an unreliable index of identity, for it is subservient to
both inward manipulation and prevailing convention.

POSTHUMOUS EXISTENCE AS METAPHOR FOR INWARDNESS
In the course of the play, the plight of inwardness, isolated from authentic and intelligible outward expression, is powerfully symbolized by the Ghost, for whom death involves an intensity of private suffering that if disclosed to the living would occasion not comprehension but horror: ‘I could a tale unfold whose lightest word / Would harrow up thy soul …’ (1.5.15-16). For Hamlet, in his ‘To be or not to be’ soliloquy, death putatively involves a sleep wherein the mind is forever tormented by appalling ‘dreams’ (3.1.66) from which it never awakens—and of which, by implication, it can never speak. Moreover, with his four last words, ‘the rest is silence’ (5.2.363), Hamlet again associates death with the incommunicable privacy of that centre of interiority which he elsewhere terms ‘my heart's core, … my heart of heart,’ and ‘my dear soul’ (3.2.73, 63).

The linkage between the inward man and death is strengthened by a correlative association between Hamlet's inwardness and the motif of the Ghost. Hamlet's sudden visit to Ophelia's closet—his initial appearance after the dialogue with the Ghost—is the first of these occasions. To Ophelia, who receives him unexpected, Hamlet appears ‘As if he had been loosed out of hell / To speak of horrors …’ (2.1.83-84)—a condition like that of the Ghost who, loosed from Purgatory, speaks of similar things: ‘O horrible! O horrible! most horrible!’ (1.5.80). Later, on the second occasion when Hamlet is associated with the Ghost, Polonius and Claudius exploit Hamlet's habit of walking ‘in the lobby’ (2.2.161), and direct Ophelia to stand in his path while they eavesdrop behind an arras. The decision of these two characters to send out a third who will converse with an enigmatic figure regularly appearing in a part of the castle duplicates the plan of Horatio, Bernardo, and Marcellus to invite Hamlet to speak to the Ghost. Moreover, in both conversations the enigmatic figure concludes with redundant valediction: the Ghost by repeating ‘Fare thee well’ (1.5.88) and ‘adieu’ (1.5.91); Hamlet by repeating ‘Farewell’ (3.1.134, 139, 142).9

The third linking of Hamlet with the motif of the Ghost occurs at the moment of death. Hamlet's invocation of the astonished ‘audience’ (5.2.340) of courtiers who have witnessed the carnage at the end of the play (‘You that look pale and tremble at this chance’ [5.2.339]) repeats almost verbatim that spoken by Bernardo to Horatio after sighting the Ghost (‘You tremble and look pale’ [1.1.56]). Similarly, the Ghost's aposiopesis (‘I could a tale unfold whose lightest word’ [1.5.16]) is echoed in Hamlet's version: ‘O, I could tell you …’ (5.2.342).

This motif of the secondary ghost (that is, the ghost implied by the duplication, in one character, of attributes or utterances associated with the primary Ghost) constitutes the supreme symbol of the plight of the inward man in the world of the play. Analysis of the first example of the motif, that is, Hamlet's visit to Ophelia's closet—will position us to probe the problematical issues of personal identity more deeply.

What is the painful vision that absorbs Hamlet as he stares at Ophelia while thrice nodding his head and sighing in dismay?10 The most striking element here is that, throughout their silent meeting, Hamlet seems completely unaware of Ophelia's ability to see his behaviour, but acts instead as if he were somehow still alone. He is dishevelled, but seems wholly unconcerned with his appearance. He gazes at her with prolonged and anguished attention, oblivious to her response. In fact, instead of regarding Ophelia as a separate person, Hamlet seems ultimately to see in her something which concerns only himself—almost as if he were contemplating his own reflection. And in a way, he is. To look at Ophelia is to confirm his own inescapable isolation. Perhaps this is the deepest meaning of Ophelia's comparison of Hamlet to a ghost released from hell to speak of horrors. Private pain propelled Hamlet into Ophelia's closet, but that pain only intensifies the longer he stays. Yet when he leaves, there is only one place he can go: back to his hell of silence. Hamlet's agony in Ophelia's closet is the recognition that he can never speak. More precisely, he can speak but only to hide what he can never say. As if he were already dead, Hamlet becomes the ghost of himself—a manifestation of his own absence, the living embodiment of his own dying words: ‘The rest is silence.’

This encounter with Ophelia reveals Hamlet in the grip of the play's central paradox: to be is not to be. In a society founded on deception and the fear of disgrace, to live as a person is to live as a ghost. In public, each is encouraged to present himself as a sheer appearance which renders invisible the reality within; in private,
each risks suffering pain that must remain dumb. More profoundly, each risks the pain of having to remain
dumb: ‘Give thy thoughts no tongue’ (1.3.59); ‘But break my heart, for I must hold my tongue’ (1.2.158).
Thus, through the need to maintain ‘th’exterior’ by words and actions, the secrets of ‘the inward man’ are as
removed from communication with the living as are the dead. But, as was suggested near the outset of our
study, without outward expression the content of inwardness becomes problematic—even to the subject
experiencing it—and is as much in need of verification as the testimony of the real Ghost.

**OVERCOMING THE FIRST-PERSON PARADIGM**

No character is more implicated in this predicament than Hamlet. But neither is any character more motivated
to transcend it. To understand his efforts in this regard, it is useful first to review his predicament. However
acutely he perceives falseness (‘To be honest, as this world goes, is to be one man picked out of ten thousand’
[2.2.178-9]) and however adroitly, through the ruse of madness, he exploits it, Hamlet cannot readily separate
his own sense of identity from the exteriority he reviles. For his very concept of himself is grounded in
concern for the exterior man and the reputation pertaining to it: ‘O God, Horatio, what a wounded name, /
Things standing thus unknown, shall I leave behind me’ (5.2.349-50). Conversely, the more Hamlet
withdraws from exteriority into inwardness, the more his view of the world is influenced by the first-person
paradigm, such that everything he sees is interpreted by analogy with his own experience. This is evident in
Hamlet's initial two soliloquies, where he defines both himself (‘O what a rogue and peasant slave am I!’
[2.2.544]) and the future (‘It is not, nor it cannot come to good’ [1.2.158]) in terms of his own immediate
situation.

Many critics conclude that Hamlet achieves no more than an unpredictable oscillation between the poles of
‘psychic opposition’ (States, 127) or identity, however defined. As a result, his character is frequently labelled
as incoherent. But the ‘yeasty collection’ (5.2.188) of contraries constituting Hamlet's character undergoes
leavening whose consequence is a genuine—though incomplete—integration of opposites. Or, to deploy a
more active metaphor, in a labour equivalent to those of ‘Hercules’ (1.2.153; 5.1.286). Hamlet realigns what is
‘out of joint’ (1.5.196), and so achieves heroic individuation.

The process of rectification can be completed only through overcoming the first-person paradigm, for through
it there is no genuine knowledge of identity, only a self-preoccupation that construes everything external by
analogy to itself. In the play, of course, the first-person paradigm is often taken for granted, as when Polonius
interprets Hamlet's presumed love-sickness in terms of his own experience (‘And truly in my youth I suffered
much extremity for love, very near this’ [2.2.189-90]), Ophelia's auditors interpret, in terms of their own
thinking, her mad utterances (‘And botch the words up fit to their own thoughts’ [4.5.10]), and Hamlet
interprets Laertes' predicament in terms of his own (‘For by the image of my cause I see / the portraiture of
his’ [5.2.77-78]).

In conjunction with this emphasis on the first-person paradigm, *Hamlet* also dramatizes the confusion created
by its absence. For the advent of the Ghost obviously constitutes an instance when the first-person paradigm is
temporarily suspended. By his tendency ‘[s]o horridly to shake our disposition / With thoughts beyond the
reaches of our souls’ (1.4.55-56; my emphasis), the Ghost literally localizes an inward experience which
exceeds the relevance of the first-person paradigm and the attempt to interpret experience in terms of one's
own case. Ironically, that very paradigm is invoked when Horatio compares the resemblance of the Ghost to
the late King with Marcellus's resemblance to himself: ‘As thou art to thyself’ (1.1.63).

But a transcending in the first-person paradigm is achieved in Hamlet's third soliloquy, where ‘grief’ (1.2.82)
over his father's death eventually deepens into awareness of the implications of mortality for ‘us all’ (3.1.83).
Death is life-terminating but also life-enlarging, because awareness of it focuses thought on the ultimate
purpose of this life which will end: ‘What should we do?’ (1.4.57). Though in the ‘To be’ soliloquy that
ultimate purpose is not yet evident and the only goal of life is to endure until the end, at least the sufficiency
of self-reference has been questioned. The ‘sea of troubles’ is far more vast than any ‘single and peculiar life’

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at the beginning of the play the ‘apparition’ is no longer construed as a mere ‘fantasy’ (1.1.31, 26) after Horatio, as supplementary witness, confirms its reality.

THE ROLE OF CATHARTIC ACTION IN REALIGNING INWARD AND OUTWARD

But, according to Hamlet, behaviour does more than confirm the inmost part. It can also modify or transform it. After the influx of pity encouraged by the Ghost (‘O step between her and her fighting soul’ [3.4.113]), Hamlet stops castigating Gertrude, and instead exhorts her to ‘reform’ (3.2.38): ‘Assume a virtue if you have it not’ (3.4.162). Here, the assuming of virtue signifies, not false appearance, but a sincere imitation of virtue in order to overcome ‘habits evil’ (3.4.164).14 If Gertrude acts virtuously for the sake of becoming virtuous (and not for the sake of seeming so), she will eventually succeed: ‘For use can almost change the stamp of nature, / And either lodge the devil or throw him out’ (3.4.170-71; my emphasis).15 This kind of cathartic action, undertaken for moral cleansing or ‘the purging of the soul’ (3.3.85), is the moral contrary of the ‘actions that a man might play,’ prescribed by the theatrical imperative; for its end or purpose is not to simulate outwardly a given moral state but inwardly to achieve it.

Rectification of the relation between inward and exterior is consummated through Hamlet’s eventual faith in end-shaping divinity—in a way clarified by analysis of the ‘ends’ shaped: ‘There’s a divinity that shapes our ends, / Rough-hew them how we will’ (5.2.10-11). On the one hand, the ‘ends’ shaped refer to the outcome of individual striving. Indeed, the Player King employs the term ‘ends’ with this meaning: ‘Our thoughts are ours, their ends none of our own’ (3.2.208). On the other hand, the ‘ends’ shaped refer to the purposes of the agent intending action, not to their result.

The profundity of Hamlet’s insight now emerges. In shaping ends, divinity is not simply equivalent to the influence of fate whose intervention renders consummation of individual purpose impossible or irrelevant: ‘Our wills and fates do so contrary run’ (3.2.206). Instead, by causing a particular purpose to fructify in a particular result, divinity shapes the meaning of that purpose.16 For the result achieved qualifies the purpose conceived. For example, when groping ‘[r]ashly’ (5.2.6) in the dark to extract the diplomatic ‘packet’ (5.2.15) purveyed by Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, Hamlet does not yet know the full implication of his purpose which is revealed to him only by its result. Here the inward man is clarified—one might accurately say constituted—by the actions of the exterior one. But conversely, this clarification by means of the exterior man depends on the initiative (what Hamlet terms ‘rashness’ [5.2.7]) of the inward one.

But Hamlet’s anagnorisis implies more than this. Identifying through a purpose beyond himself enables him to achieve authentic self-assurance: ‘This is I, / Hamlet the Dane’ (5.1.250-51). His sense of identity is no longer bounded in the nutshell of the first-person paradigm. To be himself is no longer to interpret everything else by analogy with his own case, as when, in his former melancholy, he viewed the world as a ‘sterile promontory’ overlooking ‘a sea of troubles’ (2.2.299; 3.1.59). A corresponding change has also occurred with respect to his conception of the exterior man. In the course of the play, he advances from regarding the suddenly sincere player as the ‘paragon’ (2.2.307) to be emulated in the presentation of oneself to attacking Laertes for emulating, in ‘the bravery of his grief’ (5.2.78), precisely that ideal.

Yet, though Hamlet deepens his expression of both the inward and exterior man, he cannot unambiguously reconcile their reciprocal estrangement in the world of the play. The pathos of his death illuminates the dilemma of his life: ‘Now cracks a noble heart’ (5.2.364). Unlike Gertrude, who, when confronted with her own moral identity, can simply ‘throw away the worser part of it / And live purer with other half’ (3.4.159-60), Hamlet must strain to reconcile incompatible halves, without the option of discarding one. Yet no matter how heroically he struggles, his task must end in failure. For the relation between inward and exterior is not under his exclusive control.
Consider the ‘transformation’ (2.2.5) which Hamlet's own exterior man or ‘name’ (5.2.349) begins to undergo as soon as Hamlet himself dies. In outlining the explanation which he intends to provide of the events leading to Hamlet's death, Horatio inadvertently sounds like an impresario drumming up interest in his repertoire: ‘So shall you hear / Of carnal, bloody, and unnatural acts, / Of accidental judgments, casual slaughters, / Of deaths put on by cunning and forc’d cause … All this can I / Truly deliver’ (5.2.385-91). His diverse inventory recalls that enunciated by Polonius on introducing the Players: ‘The best actors in the world, either for tragedy, comedy, history, pastoral … scene individable, or poem unlimited’ (2.2.392-96). This emphasis on exaggerated theatrical display culminates in the last words of the play, when Fortinbras orders the exposition of Hamlet's corpse on a ‘stage’ (5.2.401; my emphasis) or bier. Yet, the more Hamlet is eulogized in these ‘terms of honour’ (5.2.242), the less his rejection of theatrical exaggeration is understood.

Without exterior expression, the inward man undergoes an analogous ‘transformation’ (2.2.5). As long as inwardness passes show and remains bounded in the nutshell of interiority, there is no criterion by which to distinguish accurate predications concerning it from those that are merely ‘bad dreams’ (2.2.256). Ironically, with his last four words, ‘the rest is silence’ (5.2.363), Hamlet not only refers to interiority but seems almost to withdraw into it, as if preparing to begin the posthumous experience which has already been associated many times with precisely that pole of personal identity. But this possibility—and, of course, it is no more than a possibility—also suggests that, since now Hamlet really is dead, his interior experience entails judgment by the infallible criterion ‘above’ (3.3.60). For in the play divinity is the ultimate transcendence of the first-person paradigm.

We reach the double bind in the problematics of personal identity in *Hamlet*. Without exterior expression, the content of inwardness cannot be confirmed, except by divinity for whom there is no ‘shuffling’ (3.3.61). But with exterior expression, inwardness is equally problematized. Conventions and expectations regarding exterior manifestation distort or misconstrue the inwardness made manifest. Moreover, as we have also seen, application of the first-person paradigm leads the witnesses of outward expression to ‘botch’ it up ‘fit to their own thoughts’ (4.5.10). Hamlet cannot overcome this problem. For his task is a tragic hero's, not a ‘Saviour’s’ (1.1.164). He can only, through his dramatic *agon*, transpose the problem to larger contexts where its conflicting terms of reference—inward and exterior—can in principle be resolved. He accomplishes this first in Gertrude's closet, where, through the notion of cathartic action, outward expression becomes the means of effecting inward reform. He further reconciles the conflicting poles of identity by his recognition of the end-shaping divinity through whose influence, as we have seen, the inward purposes of individual agents are not only expressed but widened and transformed by outward action.

*Notes*

1. Cf States: ‘There are two dimensions in which a character behaves and exists before us: as body, as actor, do-er and speaker of things, as entity in physical space; and as “spirit,” as judgment, sensibility, thought, and imagination’ (187).
2. For background, see chapter 3, ‘Suger of St.-Denis,’ in Von Simpson, 61-90.
3. For a recent elaboration of Maus's thesis, see Finkelstein.
4. Solipsism, of course, assumes the verifiability of the private object in the absence of outwardness. A succinct formulation of this position is provided by Windelband: ‘Each individual mind has certain, intuitive knowledge only of itself and of its states, nor does it know anything of other minds except through ideas which refer primarily to bodies and by an argument from analogy are interpreted to indicate minds’ (2: 471).
5. Several critics take Hamlet's madness far more literally. See, for example, Lidz, 222, and Codden. Regarding the influence of gender on madness, see Findlay.
6. As C.L. Barber has copiously demonstrated, the word ‘honour’ was not used univocally but acquired a wide range of meanings during the seventeenth century.
7. Cf Hobbes, *Leviathan Parts I and II*, 87: ‘Desire of praise disposes to laudable actions, such as please them whose judgment they value.’
8. For an existential discussion of related notions, see the chapter ‘Sincerity and the Actor’ in Ilie, 78-90. For a sociological analysis, see the chapter ‘Performances’ in Goffman, 17-76.
9. For an earlier account of Hamlet's spectral side, see Robert F. Wilson, Jr.
10. A traditional answer is that Hamlet is confirming sadly to himself that Ophelia is too weak to help him. See Chambers, 188. Similarly, J. Dover Wilson argues that Hamlet, though wounded by Ophelia's rejection of him, urgently seeks ‘some comfort or help in her company’ (111-12). Kirschbaum suggests that Hamlet ‘may not see Ophelia the individual as much as Ophelia the symbol of everything in life that pains him’ (386). For emphasis on Ophelia's moral ambiguity, see Patrick, 139-44; and McGee, 138-53.
11. Goddard argues that Ophelia’s report concerns her own hallucination of Hamlet.
12. For representative criticism on these grounds, see Bartels; Barker, 37; Eagleton, 73, and Belsey, 41-42.
13. For a discussion of Claudius's abortive repentance in the context of Church of England theology, see Frye, 239-42.
14. The belief that virtue is acquired through good moral habit derives ultimately from Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 2.11032a14-26, as Jenkins in his edition of *Hamlet* (520) and others have noted.
15. However, according to Adelman, Hamlet's purpose here is to ‘divorce’ (33) Gertrude from her sexuality, in order to protect ‘the boundaries of his selfhood’ (31) from inundation by it.
16. Cf Cornford: ‘the most important element of personality—individual purpose’ (21). Contrast Herold: ‘The self one performs in order better to know oneself turns out not to be one's self at all’ (131).
17. On Horatio’s role in confirming Hamlet’s intrinsic honesty, see Halverston.

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**Criticism: Character Studies: Jennifer Low (essay date 1999)**


[In the following essay, Low examines the duel at the end of the play and contends that it is a rite of manhood that focuses Hamlet's attention on how masculinity should be shown and enables him to unite his private and public selves.]

As many critics have remarked, *Hamlet* is framed by the deeds of Fortinbras.¹ In 1.1 Marcellus and Horatio discuss Denmark's preparations for the possibility of a Norwegian invasion; in 5.2 Fortinbras enters, flushed with his victory over the Poles, just in time to receive Hamlet's endorsement of his claim to the Danish throne. Not only does Fortinbras serve as a possible monitory double for Hamlet—a son whose father is killed and who knows how to respond—Fortinbras and his martial exploits also remind us of the public sphere that is excluded from this play. Despite the play's examination of the relation between theatricality, deceit, and
public personae, much criticism has focused on psychological issues or addressed the play largely as a private and domestic tragedy. But although the focus of the play is young Hamlet’s dilemma, the drama’s time-frame matches that of Claudius’s rule over Denmark, and during that time Hamlet as a potential threat is merely one of Claudius’s concerns.

Hamlet is concerned with being, not seeming, with translating genuine feeling into activity that manifests that feeling. His mourning clothes in 1.1 publicly bespeak his determination not to play a public role—to stay out of the sun. His black attire urges the community not to attempt to include him. Hamlet wishes to grieve privately, believing that the private sphere is appropriate to a good son. But he soon learns that mourning is not enough: he must also take revenge. Such an act must necessarily have a public component, as he is a prince and the son of a king. To kill Claudius is to become involved in the political arena. Action, then, is equivalent to taking a part, both in the sense of being partisan and in the sense of acting publicly, under the eyes of others. The notion of taking a part makes Hamlet uneasy, however, particularly because such a part would involve behavior that could be divorced from true feeling. But in the course of the fencing exhibition, Hamlet discovers a means of performance acceptable to him. While fencing is a courtly pastime and a way of entertaining others, it also contains the potential for decisive action; when it is not an actual duel, fencing is always (at least theoretically) practice for such an encounter. Moreover, the duellist’s determination to back his challenge with his body offers Hamlet one solution to the problem of representing himself honestly. When the exhibition breaks out of its mimetic frame, Hamlet finds the opportunity apt for his revenge: this very public method of killing involves a ritual element that grants the deaths a stylized, sacrificial quality and appropriately solemnizes this drama of the royal family.

Hamlet’s decision to act is slowed by the need to understand all the roles that have been assigned to him. Chief among these are man and son. Hamlet learns from the ghost that his role as avenger depends upon his identity as son:

Hamlet: Speak, I am bound to hear.
Ghost: So art thou to revenge, when thou shalt hear.
Hamlet: What?
Ghost: I am thy father’s spirit.

(1.5.7-9)

The ghost’s assertion of their relationship assumes that the moral imperative of revenge is concomitant upon their blood connection. Contrast this view to Beatrice’s allusion to revenge in Much Ado: “It is a man’s office, but not yours” (4.1.267). She implies that her newly declared lover is too distant in relation to her traduced cousin to serve as Hero’s champion. In Hamlet’s case, however, the task is his. Yet the role of avenger is incompatible with the models of manhood described throughout. The “What a piece of work is man” speech (2.2.303-08) emphasizes rationality, the infinite potential inherent in man’s reason. This valorization of mental faculties seems incompatible with the ghost’s call to action and revenge. Insofar as the speech describes an ideal of mankind, it urges both restraint and a reverence for the godhead in man.

Later, Hamlet offers Gertrude a blazon in praise of her husband. Apparently similar to the earlier speech, it actually offers an alternative model of masculinity:

See what a grace was seated on this brow:
Hyperion’s curls, the front of Jove himself,
An eye like Mars, to threaten and command,
A station like the herald Mercury
New lighted on a [heaven-]kissing hill,
A combination and a form indeed,
Where every god did seem to set his seal
To give the world assurance of a man.
Again the speech emphasizes man's godlike stature; it further describes King Hamlet's physical presence as manhood embodied. Young Hamlet's words create the notion of masculinity through specific signs which, taken together, offer a pictorial, almost emblematic representation of virility. Significantly, in this blazon the eye is not primarily an organ of apprehension; instead, it enacts unspoken imperatives, shaping the responses of those on whom the king glances.

In contrast, Gertrude uses eyesight as a figure for psychological perception. Her son refers to her senses to describe as an error of synesthesia her failure to recognize his father's superiority: “Eyes without feeling, feeling without sight, / Ears without hands or eyes, smelling sans all, / … Could not so mope” (3.4.78-81). Gertrude responds by turning inward, away from her physical senses to her inner vision: “Thou turn'st my eyes into my very soul” (89). She conceives the recognition of her error as a visual apprehension of wrong. Her words suggest that the function of her eyes is to monitor her own spiritual well being; Hamlet Senior, on the other hand, must use his eyes in a gesture of command. The old king's ability to urge the behavior of others characterizes masculine dominance as a theatrical staging (and, incidentally, recalls early modern concerns about the power of the stageplayer). His mien compels, not by demonstrating force but by implying his capacity to shift to action. Action thus proves inseparable from theatricality; young Hamlet eventually learns the lesson as he finds his opportunity to act in the context of a performance.

To combine private and public is, for Hamlet, both to unite “that within” with forms and shapes, as he says (1.2.82), and to join the role of son with that of prince. While the role of prince by itself could be that of the classic protagonist of revenge tragedy, Hamlet's desire to follow his father's model of masculinity makes him perceive such an enactment as shrill and theatrical. When Hamlet blazons his father, the reference to his stance “like the herald Mercury / New lighted on a [heaven-] kissing hill (3.4.59) recalls Quintilian's assertion that action in oratory is “a discourse, and sometimes … a certain eloquence of the body” (2:340). When speech and action are in harmony, their combination creates a sense of authenticity, of truth in argument. A public role for Hamlet must both derive from inward feeling and offer an acceptable presentation of himself as his father's heir.

Manhood figures largely in Hamlet's recollection of the dead king. When Horatio greets Hamlet in act 1, he comforts the grieving prince with the remembrance, “I saw him once, 'a was a goodly king” (1.2.186). Hamlet replies, “'A was a man, take him for all in all, / I shall not look upon his like again” (187-88). Unlike Fortinbras, whose eulogy upon Hamlet's corpse is, “he was likely, had he been put on, / To have prov'd most royal” (5.2.397-98), Hamlet does not see his subject's primary virtue in his royalty but in his masculinity. Though Hamlet's comment refers in part to the inevitable masculinity of all men, including kings, it also bespeaks with simplicity the nobility inherent in his conception of what it means to be a man. As Howard Felperin says in discussing the morality play as one of this tragedy's antecedents, Hamlet manifests “a troubled awareness … of the simultaneous resemblance and discrepancy between the play and its older models that is increasingly forced upon us as the action proceeds” (60). The player's enactment of revenge reproaches him because, unlike his father's appearance, it is an empty show. Hamlet wants to rant, yet feels he must not: he chides himself for womanly words, for his need “like a whore [to] unpack my heart with words, / And [to] fall a-cursing like a very drab” (2.2.585-86). He wants to act but cannot do so until he has discovered his own form of masculine decorum, his way of uniting private and public identities.

That the fencing match is significant should be evident from the fact that it was a departure from the original story of Hamlet. Shakespeare's depiction of Hamlet (who is, in the original version by Saxo Grammaticus, resolute and unhesitating) is capped by the fencing scene. But there is a distinction between duelling and fencing, and my use of the term “duellist” differs somewhat from that of other critics who have applied the
term to Hamlet. S.P. Zitner argues that Hamlet seeks to attain “a state of mind that proceeds from ethical contemplation, social awareness, a quenching of passion, and ... the disinterestedness that abandons the private will to the will of God,” assuming that Hamlet follows the precepts of the Renaissance fencing-master Vincentio Saviolo, whose writings proscribed vengeful duels (Zitner 8; Saviolo 381). But Hamlet is not a duellist in this sense. Far from attempting to kill in a moral frame of mind, he does not even definitively plan to kill his stepfather by means of the sword. He does not reject the treacherous stab in the back because it is an ignoble act but because it punishes Claudio ineffectively, permitting him (Hamlet assumes) to rise to Heaven purged of his sins. What Hamlet seeks throughout the play is a way to perform the part of a man according to his father's model.

Such a mode is that of the duellist. It corresponds to Hamlet's needs in several ways. First, the verbal challenge that precedes a proper duel pledges to prove through action what is uttered in speech; thus, it establishes a connection between word and meaning that destroys the seeming/being dichotomy. Second, the duel harks back to medieval trial ordeals, invoking both historical tradition and the attempt by civil law to involve a heavenly tribunal. The custom of the duel also bears strong overtones of courtliness and chivalry that enable young Hamlet to act publicly in a princely manner. Finally, within that courtly context, the duel embodies the notion of manhood, both through the correspondence of word and deed and through the implicit legitimization of vigilantism (and, by extension, individualism) as a means of achieving justice. Thus we should not be surprised at Hamlet's avowal of his "continual practice" of fencing since Laertes's departure for France. Later, when sport turns into violence, Hamlet's enterprise in turning Claudius's own tools against him demonstrates his ease in the role of swordsman and suggests the psychological rightness of this pastime for him.

To understand fully the significance of the contest for Hamlet, we must be aware of the history of the duel in England. In the 1580s and 1590s, Italian weaponry and customs reshaped the English combat.9 The lightness of the Italian rapier made it popular; ease and popularity altered the nature of its use. Having passed through two distinct state-sponsored forms, the single combat evolved into an extra-legal proceeding.

The alternative term for the duel—trial by combat—derived from the duel's position in late medieval English law as a supplement to criminal trial and judgment. The practice was generally understood as a test in which God's hand would intervene on the right side.10 Social historian Robert Bartlett clarifies its purpose: "The components, in the fifth century as in the thirteenth, are clear: the absence of other means of proof, divine judgment, single combat, a means of proof" (115). The duel was a part of due process, used to distinguish between two disputants when evidence could not determine the case.11 The ritual was a legal trial proceeding that combined investigation, judgment, and, if a combatant was killed outright, summary execution. The presence of onlookers included the community in the ritual and reinforced the performative aspect of the custom.12

As English civil law developed, the judicial duel fell into disuse and another form of state-sanctioned single combat became popular: the joust.13 What we may call the extra-judicial duel almost certainly derived, if not from the joust itself, then from the traditions of chivalry that initially structured that type of one-to-one combat (Billacois 5-6).

By the time of the Tudors, the increasing centralization of power in the monarch diminished the importance of the nobility.14 The extra-judicial duel, or the duel of honor, helped to reaffirm the status of the aristocrat. Engaging in duels was a way for a nobleman to assert his independence from the Crown's authority, maintaining a right that had existed from the time when the nobility were essentially answerable to themselves alone (Billacois 29-30). Duels of honor fought over trivial remarks and casual insults demonstrated Italianate sprezzatura and enhanced one's reputation in an era when the aristocrat's role was increasingly unclear.15
In the late sixteenth century, the English Masters of Defence developed the fencing match as commercial entertainment for another level of society. An organization that legitimated the professional status of fencing teachers, the Masters of Defence generated publicity for their art by requiring students to engage in public matches in order to rise in the ranks of the organization. Yet because the legitimacy of the organization itself depended on the whim of the monarch (James I gave them his royal warrant, Elizabeth did not), the art of fencing remained a somewhat shady enterprise. Even before the sixteenth century, fencers tended to congregate in the suburbs of London where, later, theaters would be built. Early fencing exhibitions were staged outdoors and in taverns, but when Burbage and other entrepreneurs began to finance the playhouses, these stages were used for fencing exhibitions as they were for dramas and the other forms of secular spectacle popular at that time.16

When the duel is placed in the context of a theatrical production, that context interrogates the very structure of drama's mimetic framework. Because all combat is itself a performance, the performative aspect of theatre is redundant in the enactment of the duel. Staged, the duel's apparent authenticity does not depend on how successfully the actors represent a state of mind. While a staged combat is choreographed and its outcome is predetermined, it still has a reality lacking in more mimetic acts. The difference derives partly from the fact that words are extrinsic to the duel. As Cynthia Marshall says of the wrestling match in As You Like It,

[T]he firmest distinction between the “game” or “spectacle” of the wrestling match and the “drama” of the surrounding action will also be the most obvious one: wrestling is an affair of bodies and not words. Le Beau's announcement of Charles's defeat—“He cannot speak” (1.2.208)—illustrates perfectly the established priority of deed over word, the capacity of pure spectacle or of violence … to destroy language. The ludic interval, because it presents violent physical action of a sort that is anterior to language, would seem to possess greater “reality” than the surrounding text of As You Like It.

(276-77)

Marshall's analysis reminds us that the duel was only one instance of the plentiful spectacular violence enacted during this period. Yet the wrestling match and the duel share that element of performativity, of ludic entertainment, that separates such spectacle from its surrounding context.

From inception to conclusion, such a physical contest, staged, functions as a small drama on its own. Self-contained, a small play-within-a-play, it presents two figures whose fight resolves their conflict. The fight itself is bounded, delimited by on-stage presentation. In a way, the conventions of dramatic structure force the duel (when it is part of a drama) to revert to its earlier form as trial by combat. If the challenge to the duel is a speech-act, the staged duel is a tacit judgment of the combatants.

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When Osric, the superfine courtier, asks Hamlet to take part in the contest in compliance with the King and Queen's wish, his account of the proposed fencing match stresses the formal nature of the exhibition. He emphasizes the courtliness of Laertes, hinting that the nature of any entertainment in which he takes part will be equally elegant:

Osric: Sir, here is newly come to court Laertes, believe me, an absolute [gentleman], full of most excellent differences, of very soft society, and great showing; indeed, to speak sellingly of him, he is the card or calendar of gentry; for you shall find in him the continent of what part a gentleman would see.

(5.2.106-11)
Osric's euphonious description of the proposed combat and his account of Claudius's and Laertes's wager both call attention to the courtly character of this ludic competition. Osric puts forth the combat as a sport of gentility, a combat in spirit and in class closer to the tilt than to the duelling exhibitions of early modern England. Hamlet and Laertes both use unusual linguistic formality when they meet for the fencing competition. Their language suggests that the fencing will be well-governed, controlled, regulated by the ceremonies of courtesy. But the ceremony, of course, has been designed by Claudius, the devious, false monarch.

Although the challenge to this combat characterizes it as an entertainment, not a duel, one participant (Laertes) and one watcher (Claudius) are aware that the combat will be lethal. Their knowledge (in which we participate) restructures the nature of the match. Yet the fencing appears sportive and friendly at first. Hamlet actually asks Laertes to judge one of his hits. In the crucial bout, in which each wounds the other with the envenomed rapier, they appear at first to be in earnest; Claudius calls out, “Part them, they are incens'd” (5.2.302). But when Hamlet refutes this, he and Laertes face one another again. It is only when Gertrude cries out at the poison and Laertes admits his treachery that disorder breaks out. The match which had seemed a lawful entertainment reveals itself as a ploy of the monarch, created by the king's design and yet unlawful, as perfidious as Claudius himself.

At this point, the device that Claudius has created for Hamlet's death grows beyond his control. As Laertes falls, he confesses his wrongdoing toward Hamlet, thereby recanting the unspoken accusation of Hamlet as his father's murderer. Moreover, his final words—“the King, the King's to blame” (5.2.320)—offer a new accusation that may be proven in blood. Hamlet attacks his uncle with the envenomed sword and, as he forces Claudius to drink the poisoned wine, makes his own accusation: “[T]hou incestious, murd'rous, damned Dane,” he charges as he acts (5.2.325-26). The violence set in motion by the king becomes the swordsman's prerogative.

The first overt violence occurs earlier—in the almost comical struggle between Hamlet and Laertes in Ophelia's grave. That brawl occurs in a disjunctive setting that shows how unpromising combat is when it takes place without ceremony or due process. That combat is replayed in the fencing match set up by Claudius as a blind for murder. The display of competitive sport now carries its participants beyond the bounds set by the game. Throughout, Shakespeare exploits the dynamics of violence as he has already done in As You Like It. As Marshall says of the ludic match in that play, one character (here, Laertes) sees violence as the sign of sincerity, authentic feeling, while another character (Claudius) sees “the formal violence of [a contest] as open to manipulation” (268). But with the denouement Hamlet recognizes both possibilities: for him the violence is public display, a chance to write his story, as well as the embodiment of feeling. Claudius's manipulations enable him to die as an avenger and a true prince.

For the court onlookers in Hamlet, a performance that began as a game has exploded its boundaries, breaking out of ceremony and playfulness to become brutal, sly, and real. What the onlookers realize only at the bloody conclusion is that this apparent sport concealed more than one character's intention not to “act,” but in fact, in deed, to do something decisive to alter his circumstances.

For us as audience, the fencing exhibition restructures the relationships within the larger play. As Jean Howard points out, the fencing places Hamlet “visually at the center, rather than the periphery of the action. Sword in hand, he is himself a public actor” (118). At that juncture, Hamlet's internal state (which has been the play’s focus) and the public world of Denmark come together. Once Hamlet begins the match, he becomes an actor rather than an observer. Even though the combat is not a performance of his choosing, it offers him the opportunity to act, to do—in earnest as well as in the ludic context of the competition.

Notes
See, for example, Bevington 1071.

1. It is convenient to cite Ernest Jones's *Hamlet and Oedipus* (1949) as the beginning of the body of psychoanalytic criticism of *Hamlet*. C.S. Lewis, however, names Schlegel (1815), Hazlitt (1815), Hallam (1837-39), Coleridge (1856), Sievers (1866), Raleigh (1907), and Clutton-Brock (1922) as critics who analyze Hamlet's psychology (cited in Lewis 140-41). Maus (1995) has recently addressed the issues of theatricality and deceit in her excellent discussion of “seeming” in *Hamlet* (1-5).

2. James V. Holleran discusses this scene in “Maimed Funeral Rites in Hamlet.” Holleran gives an interesting reading of the fencing exhibition as a distorted version of Holy Communion (87-93).

3. Masculinity in *Hamlet* is far from being a stable construct, and the assumptions about its constitution vary from one character to another. As Judith Butler says, summarizing phenomenologist theories of gender,

   gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time—an identity instituted through a *stylized repetition of acts*. Further, gender is instituted through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self.

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Butler's discussion of gender forms a large part of the theoretical underpinning of my analysis of duelling and masculinity in *Hamlet*.

5. All quotations of Shakespeare's works are from William Shakespeare, *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans.

6. My discussion of rationality and revenge has been inflected by Gordon Braden's analysis of Stoicism in English Renaissance drama in *Renaissance Tragedy and the Senecan Tradition*.

7. For early modern texts that reveal anxiety about the powers of the stage-player, see J. Northbrooke, Stephen Gosson, Anthony Munday, and Philip Stubbes, among others.

8. See Saxo Grammaticus.

9. For information about the change in swordfighting brought about by the introduction of the rapier to late sixteenth-century England, see Aylward 26-75, Brian Parker 58, and Sieveking 2:389-407, among others.

10. For two conflicting views on this point, see Lea 166 and Bartlett 68.

11. But according to Bartlett, “The idea of ‘letting them fight it out’ is at least as strong as the sentiment ‘may the best man win’ (even given that ‘best’ means ‘with the best case’)” (114).

12. As Foucault says of the watchers at executions, “they must be the witnesses, the guarantors, of the punishment, and … they must to a certain extent take part in it. The right to be witnesses was one they possessed and claimed” (58).

13. Arguing that the judicial duel was not a thing of the past in early modern England, Francois Billacois asserts that it continued into the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (19). For an excellent discussion of jousting and chivalry, see Maurice Keen 83-7.

14. Lawrence Stone's groundbreaking study *The Crisis of the Aristocracy*, 1558-1641 was among the first to discuss this phenomenon in detail.

15. On the subject of trivial remarks as the pretext for single combats, see Parks 166-72. For the aristocrat's anxiety about his social role and the complex codes of behavior that resulted from this anxiety, see Whigham.

16. See Wickham 2.1.168 and 2.2.42 for a discussion of the various kinds of entertainment offered in Elizabethan and Jacobean London.

17. For discussion of Claudius's use of the performative fencing display as concealment for the assassination of Prince Hamlet, see Holleran 67 and Alexander 23 and 174-75.
18. I should acknowledge the debt that this point owes to Johan Huizinga.

**Literature Cited**


Criticism: Gender Issues: Elaine Showalter (essay date 1985)


[In the following essay, Showalter probes a number of crucial questions surrounding the character of Ophelia which involve her status in the play and bring to the forefront the relation between madness, representation, women's sexuality, and femaleness.]

“As a sort of a come-on, I announced that I would speak today about that piece of bait named Ophelia, and I'll be as good as my word.” These are the words which begin the psychoanalytic seminar on Hamlet presented in Paris in 1959 by Jacques Lacan. But despite his promising come-on, Lacan was not as good as his word. He goes on for some 41 pages to speak about Hamlet, and when he does mention Ophelia, she is merely what Lacan calls “the object Ophelia”—that is, the object of Hamlet's male desire. The etymology of Ophelia, Lacan asserts, is “O-phallus,” and her role in the drama can only be to function as the exteriorized figuration of what Lacan predictably and, in view of his own early work with psychotic women, disappointingly
suggests is the phallus as transcendental signifier. To play such a part obviously makes Ophelia “essential,” as Lacan admits; but only because, in his words, “she is linked forever, for centuries, to the figure of Hamlet.”

The bait-and-switch game that Lacan plays with Ophelia is a cynical but not unusual instance of her deployment in psychiatric and critical texts. For most critics of Shakespeare, Ophelia has been an insignificant minor character in the play, touching in her weakness and madness but chiefly interesting, of course, in what she tells us about Hamlet. And while female readers of Shakespeare have often attempted to champion Ophelia, even feminist critics have done so with a certain embarrassment. As Annette Kolodny ruefully admits: “it is after all, an imposition of high order to ask the viewer to attend to Ophelia's sufferings in a scene where, before, he's always so comfortably kept his eye fixed on Hamlet.”

Yet when feminist criticism allows Ophelia to upstage Hamlet, it also brings to the foreground the issues in an ongoing theoretical debate about the cultural links between femininity, female sexuality, insanity, and representation. Though she is neglected in criticism, Ophelia is probably the most frequently illustrated and cited of Shakespeare's heroines. Her visibility as a subject in literature, popular culture, and painting, from Redon who paints her drowning, to Bob Dylan, who places her on Desolation Row, to Cannon Mills, which has named a flowery sheet pattern after her, is in inverse relation to her invisibility in Shakespearean critical texts. Why has she been such a potent and obsessive figure in our cultural mythology? Insofar as Hamlet names Ophelia as “woman” and “frailty,” substituting an ideological view of femininity for a personal one, is she indeed representative of Woman, and does her madness stand for the oppression of women in society as well as in tragedy? Furthermore, since Laertes calls Ophelia a “document in madness,” does she represent the textual archetype of woman as madness or madness as woman? And finally, how should feminist criticism represent Ophelia in its own discourse? What is our responsibility towards her as character and as woman?

Feminist critics have offered a variety of responses to these questions. Some have maintained that we should represent Ophelia as a lawyer represents a client, that we should become her Horatia, in this harsh world reporting her and her cause aright to the unsatisfied. Carol Neely, for example, describes advocacy—speaking for Ophelia—as our proper role: “As a feminist critic,” she writes, “I must ‘tell’ Ophelia's story.” But what can we mean by Ophelia's story? The story of her life? The story of her betrayal at the hands of her father, brother, lover, court, society? The story of her rejection and marginalization by male critics of Shakespeare? Shakespeare gives us very little information from which to imagine a past for Ophelia. She appears in only five of the play's twenty scenes; the pre-play course of her love story with Hamlet is known only by a few ambiguous flashbacks. Her tragedy is subordinated in the play; unlike Hamlet, she does not struggle with moral choices or alternatives. Thus another feminist critic, Lee Edwards, concludes that it is impossible to reconstruct Ophelia's biography from the text: “We can imagine Hamlet's story without Ophelia, but Ophelia literally has no story without Hamlet.”

If we turn from American to French feminist theory, Ophelia might confirm the impossibility of representing the feminine in patriarchal discourse as other than madness, incoherence, fluidity, or silence. In French theoretical criticism, the feminine or “Woman” is that which escapes representation in patriarchal language and symbolism; it remains on the side of negativity, absence, and lack. In comparison to Hamlet, Ophelia is certainly a creature of lack. “I think nothing, my lord,” she tells him in the Mousetrap scene, and he cruelly twists her words:

Hamlet: That's a fair thought to lie between maids' legs.
Ophelia: What is, my lord?
Hamlet: Nothing.

(III.ii.117-19)
In Elizabethan slang, “nothing” was a term for the female genitalia, as in *Much Ado About Nothing*. To Hamlet, then, “nothing” is what lies between maids’ legs, for, in the male visual system of representation and desire, women's sexual organs, in the words of the French psychoanalyst Luce Irigaray, “represent the horror of having nothing to see.” When Ophelia is mad, Gertrude says that “Her speech is nothing,” mere “unshaped use.” Ophelia's speech thus represents the horror of having nothing to say in the public terms defined by the court. Deprived of thought, sexuality, language, Ophelia's story becomes the Story of O—the zero, the empty circle or mystery of feminine difference, the cipher of female sexuality to be deciphered by feminist interpretation.

A third approach would be to read Ophelia's story as the female subtext of the tragedy, the repressed story of Hamlet. In this reading, Ophelia represents the strong emotions that the Elizabethans as well as the Freudians thought womanish and unmanly. When Laertes weeps for his dead sister he says of his tears that “When these are gone, / The woman will be out”—that is to say, that the feminine and shameful part of his nature will be purged. According to David Leverenz, in an important essay called “The Woman in Hamlet,” Hamlet's disgust at the feminine passivity in himself is translated into violent revulsion against women, and into his brutal behavior towards Ophelia. Ophelia's suicide, Leverenz argues, then becomes “a microcosm of the male world's banishment of the female, because ‘woman’ represents everything denied by reasonable men.”

It is perhaps because Hamlet's emotional vulnerability can so readily be conceptualized as feminine that this is the only heroic male role in Shakespeare which has been regularly acted by women, in a tradition from Sarah Bernhardt to, most recently, Diane Venora, in a production directed by Joseph Papp. Leopold Bloom speculates on this tradition in *Ulysses*, musing on the Hamlet of the actress Mrs Bandman Palmer: “Male impersonator. Perhaps he was a woman? Why Ophelia committed suicide?”

While all of these approaches have much to recommend them, each also presents critical problems. To liberate Ophelia from the text, or to make her its tragic center, is to re-appropriate her for our own ends; to dissolve her into a female symbolism of absence is to endorse our own marginality; to make her Hamlet's anima is to reduce her to a metaphor of male experience. I would like to propose instead that Ophelia *does* have a story of her own that feminist criticism can tell; it is neither her life story, nor her love story, nor Lacan's story, but rather the history of her representation. This essay tries to bring together some of the categories of French feminist thought about the “feminine” with the empirical energies of American historical and critical research: to yoke French theory and Yankee knowhow.

Tracing the iconography of Ophelia in English and French painting, photography, psychiatry, and literature, as well as in theatrical production, I will be showing first of all the representational bonds between female insanity and female sexuality. Secondly, I want to demonstrate the two-way transaction between psychiatric theory and cultural representation. As one medical historian has observed, we could provide a manual of female insanity by chronicling the illustrations of Ophelia; this is so because the illustrations of Ophelia have played a major role in the theoretical construction of female insanity. Finally, I want to suggest that the feminist revision of Ophelia comes as much from the actress's freedom as from the critic's interpretation. When Shakespeare's heroines began to be played by women instead of boys, the presence of the female body and female voice, quite apart from details of interpretation, created new meanings and subversive tensions in these roles, and perhaps most importantly with Ophelia. Looking at Ophelia's history on and off the stage, I will point out the contest between male and female representations of Ophelia, cycles of critical repression and feminist reclamation of which contemporary feminist criticism is only the most recent phase. By beginning with these data from cultural history, instead of moving from the grid of literary theory, I hope to conclude with a fuller sense of the responsibilities of feminist criticism, as well as a new perspective on Ophelia.
“Of all the characters in *Hamlet,*” Bridget Lyons has pointed out, “Ophelia is most persistently presented in terms of symbolic meanings.” Her behavior, her appearance, her gestures, her costume, and her props, are freighted with emblematic significance, and for many generations of Shakespearean critics her part in the play has seemed to be primarily iconographic. Ophelia's symbolic meanings, moreover, are specifically feminine. Whereas for Hamlet madness is metaphysical, linked with culture, for Ophelia it is a product of the female body and female nature, perhaps that nature's purest form. On the Elizabethan stage, the conventions of female insanity were sharply defined. Ophelia dresses in white, decks herself with “fantastical garlands” of wild flowers, and enters, according to the stage directions of the “Bad” Quarto, “distracted” playing on a lute with her “hair down singing.” Her speeches are marked by extravagant metaphors, lyrical free associations, and “explosive sexual imagery.” She sings wistful and bawdy ballads, and ends her life by drowning.

All of these conventions carry specific messages about femininity and sexuality. Ophelia's virginal and vacant white is contrasted with Hamlet's scholar's garb, his “suits of solemn black.” Her flowers suggest the discordant double images of female sexuality as both innocent blossoming and whorish contamination; she is the “green girl” of pastoral, the virginal “Rose of May” and the sexually explicit madwoman who, in giving away her wild flowers and herbs, is symbolically deflowering herself. The “weedy trophies” and phallic “long purples” which she wears to her death intimate an improper and discordant sexuality that Gertrude's lovely elegy cannot quite obscure. In Elizabethan and Jacobean drama, the stage direction that a woman enters with dishevelled hair indicates that she might either be mad or the victim of a rape; the disordered hair, her offense against decorum, suggests sensuality in each case. The mad Ophelia's bawdy songs and verbal license, while they give her access to “an entirely different range of experience” from what she is allowed as the dutiful daughter, seem to be her one sanctioned form of self-assertion as a woman, quickly followed, as if in retribution, by her death.

Drowning too was associated with the feminine, with female fluidity as opposed to masculine aridity. In his discussion of the “Ophelia complex,” the phenomenologist Gaston Bachelard traces the symbolic connections between women, water, and death. Drowning, he suggests, becomes the truly feminine death in the dramas of literature and life, one which is a beautiful immersion and submersion in the female element. Water is the profound and organic symbol of the liquid woman whose eyes are so easily drowned in tears, as her body is the repository of blood, amniotic fluid, and milk. A man contemplating this feminine suicide understands it by reaching for what is feminine in himself, like Laertes, by a temporary surrender to his own fluidity—that is, his tears; and he becomes a man again in becoming once more dry—when his tears are stopped.

Clinically speaking, Ophelia's behavior and appearance are characteristic of the malady the Elizabethans would have diagnosed as female love-melancholy, or erotomania. From about 1580, melancholy had become a fashionable disease among young men, especially in London, and Hamlet himself is a prototype of the melancholy hero. Yet the epidemic of melancholy associated with intellectual and imaginative genius “curiously bypassed women.” Women's melancholy was seen instead as biological, and emotional in origins.

On the stage, Ophelia's madness was presented as the predictable outcome of erotomania. From 1660, when women first appeared on the public stage, to the beginnings of the eighteenth century, the most celebrated of the actresses who played Ophelia were those whom rumor credited with disappointments in love. The greatest triumph was reserved for Susan Mountfort, a former actress at Lincoln's Inn Fields who had gone mad after her lover's betrayal. One night in 1720 she escaped from her keeper, rushed to the theater, and just as the Ophelia of the evening was to enter for her mad scene, “sprang forward in her place … with wild eyes and wavering motion.” As a contemporary reported, “she was in truth Ophelia herself, to the amazement of the performers as well as of the audience—nature having made this last effort, her vital powers failed her and she died soon after.” These theatrical legends reinforced the belief of the age that female madness was a part of female nature, less to be imitated by an actress than demonstrated by a deranged woman in a performance of her emotions.
The subversive or violent possibilities of the mad scene were nearly eliminated, however, on the eighteenth-century stage. Late Augustan stereotypes of female love-melancholy were sentimentalized versions which minimized the force of female sexuality, and made female insanity a pretty stimulant to male sensibility. Actresses such as Mrs Lessingham in 1772, and Mary Bolton in 1811, played Ophelia in this decorous style, relying on the familiar images of the white dress, loose hair, and wild flowers to convey a polite feminine distraction, highly suitable for pictorial reproduction, and appropriate for Samuel Johnson's description of Ophelia as young, beautiful, harmless, and pious. Even Mrs Siddons in 1785 played the mad scene with stately and classical dignity. … For much of the period, in fact, Augustan objections to the levity and indecency of Ophelia's language and behavior led to censorship of the part. Her lines were frequently cut, and the role was often assigned to a singer instead of an actress, making the mode of representation musical rather than visual or verbal.

But whereas the Augustan response to madness was a denial, the romantic response was an embrace. The figure of the madwoman permeates romantic literature, from the gothic novelists to Wordsworth and Scott in such texts as “The Thorn” and The Heart of Midlothian, where she stands for sexual victimization, bereavement, and thrilling emotional extremity. Romantic artists such as Thomas Barker and George Shepheard painted pathetically abandoned Crazy Kates and Crazy Anns, while Henry Fuseli's “Mad Kate” is almost demonically possessed, an orphan of the romantic storm.

In the Shakespearean theater, Ophelia's romantic revival began in France rather than England. When Charles Kemble made his Paris debut as Hamlet with an English troupe in 1827, his Ophelia was a young Irish ingénue named Harriet Smithson. Smithson used “her extensive command of mime to depict in precise gesture the state of Ophelia's confused mind.” In the mad scene, she entered in a long black veil, suggesting the standard imagery of female sexual mystery in the gothic novel, with scattered bedlamish wisps of straw in her hair. … Spreading the veil on the ground as she sang, she spread flowers upon it in the shape of a cross, as if to make her father's grave, and mimed a burial, a piece of stage business which remained in vogue for the rest of the century. The French audiences were stunned. Dumas recalled that “it was the first time I saw in the theatre real passions, giving life to men and women of flesh and blood.” The 23-year-old Hector Berlioz, who was in the audience on the first night, fell madly in love, and eventually married Harriet Smithson despite his family's frantic opposition. Her image as the mad Ophelia was represented in popular lithographs and exhibited in bookshop and printshop windows. Her costume was imitated by the fashionable, and a coiffure “à la folle,” consisting of a “black veil with wisps of straw tastefully interwoven” in the hair, was widely copied by the Parisian beau monde, always on the lookout for something new.

Although Smithson never acted Ophelia on the English stage, her intensely visual performance quickly influenced English productions as well; and indeed the romantic Ophelia—a young girl passionately and visibly driven to picturesque madness—became the dominant international acting style for the next 150 years, from Helena Modjeska in Poland in 1871, to the 18-year-old Jean Simmons in the Laurence Olivier film of 1948.

Whereas the romantic Hamlet, in Coleridge's famous dictum, thinks too much, has an “overbalance of the contemplative faculty” and an overactive intellect, the romantic Ophelia is a girl who feels too much, who drowns in feeling. The romantic critics seem to have felt that the less said about Ophelia the better; the point was to look at her. Hazlitt, for one, is speechless before her, calling her “a character almost too exquisitely touching to be dwelt upon.” While the Augustans represent Ophelia as music, the romantics transform her into an objet d'art, as if to take literally Claudius's lament, “poor Ophelia / Divided from herself and her fair judgment, / Without the which we are pictures.”
Smithson's performance is best recaptured in a series of pictures done by Delacroix from 1830 to 1850, which show a strong romantic interest in the relation of female sexuality and insanity.\textsuperscript{25} The most innovative and influential of Delacroix's lithographs is \textit{La Mort d'Ophélie} of 1843, the first of three studies. Its sensual languor, with Ophelia half-suspended in the stream as her dress slips from her body, anticipated the fascination with the erotic trance of the hysteric as it would be studied by Jean-Martin Charcot and his students, including Janet and Freud. Delacroix's interest in the drowning Ophelia is also reproduced to the point of obsession in later nineteenth-century painting. The English Pre-Raphaelites painted her again and again, choosing the drowning which is only described in the play, and where no actress's image had preceded them or interfered with their imaginative supremacy.

In the Royal Academy show of 1852, Arthur Hughes's entry shows a tiny waif-like creature—a sort of Tinker Bell Ophelia—in a filmy white gown, perched on a tree trunk by the stream. The overall effect is softened, sexless, and hazy, although the straw in her hair resembles a crown of thorns. Hughes's juxtaposition of childlike femininity and Christian martyrdom was overpowered, however, by John Everett Millais's great painting of Ophelia in the same show. … While Millais's Ophelia is sensuous siren as well as victim, the artist rather than the subject dominates the scene. The division of space between Ophelia and the natural details Millais had so painstakingly pursued reduces her to one more visual object; and the painting has such a hard surface, strangely flattened perspective, and brilliant light that it seems cruelly indifferent to the woman's death.

These Pre-Raphaelite images were part of a new and intricate traffic between images of women and madness in late nineteenth-century literature, psychiatry, drama, and art. First of all, superintendents of Victorian lunatic asylums were also enthusiasts of Shakespeare, who turned to his dramas for models of mental aberration that could be applied to their clinical practice. The case study of Ophelia was one that seemed particularly useful as an account of hysteria or mental breakdown in adolescence, a period of sexual instability which the Victorians regarded as risky for women's mental health. As Dr John Charles Bucknill, president of the Medico-Psychological Association, remarked in 1859, “Ophelia is the very type of a class of cases by no means uncommon. Every mental physician of moderately extensive experience must have seen many Ophelias. It is a copy from nature, after the fashion of the Pre-Raphaelite school.”\textsuperscript{26} Dr John Conolly, the celebrated superintendent of the Hanwell Asylum, and founder of the committee to make Stratford a national trust, concurred. In his \textit{Study of Hamlet} in 1863 he noted that even casual visitors to mental institutions could recognize an Ophelia in the wards: “the same young years, the same faded beauty, the same fantastic dress and interrupted song.”\textsuperscript{27} Medical textbooks illustrated their discussions of female patients with sketches of Ophelia-like maidens.

But Conolly also pointed out that the graceful Ophelias who dominated the Victorian stage were quite unlike the women who had become the majority of the inmate population in Victorian public asylums. “It seems to be supposed,” he protested, “that it is an easy task to play the part of a crazy girl, and that it is chiefly composed of singing and prettiness. The habitual courtesy, the partial rudeness of mental disorder, are things to be witnessed. … An actress, ambitious of something beyond cold imitation, might find the contemplation of such cases a not unprofitable study.”\textsuperscript{28}

Yet when Ellen Terry took up Conolly's challenge, and went to an asylum to observe real madwomen, she found them “too theatrical” to teach her anything.\textsuperscript{29} This was because the iconography of the romantic Ophelia had begun to infiltrate reality, to define a style for mad young women seeking to express and communicate their distress. And where the women themselves did not willingly throw themselves into Ophelia-like postures, asylum superintendents, armed with the new technology of photography, imposed the costume, gesture, props, and expression of Ophelia upon them. In England, the camera was introduced to asylum work in the 1850s by Dr Hugh Welch Diamond, who photographed his female patients at the Surrey
Asylum and at Bethlem. Diamond was heavily influenced by literary and visual models in his posing of the female subjects. His pictures of madwomen, posed in prayer, or decked with Ophelia-like garlands, were copied for Victorian consumption as touched-up lithographs in professional journals. …

Reality, psychiatry, and representational convention were even more confused in the photographic records of hysteria produced in the 1870s by Jean-Martin Charcot. Charcot was the first clinician to install a fully-equipped photographic atelier in his Paris hospital, La Salpêtrière, to record the performances of his hysterical stars. Charcot's clinic became, as he said, a "living theatre" of female pathology; his women patients were coached in their performances for the camera, and, under hypnosis, were sometimes instructed to play heroines from Shakespeare. Among them, a 15-year-old girl named Augustine was featured in the published volumes called *Iconographies* in every posture of *la grande hystérie*. With her white hospital gown and flowing locks, Augustine frequently resembles the reproductions of Ophelia as icon and actress which had been in wide circulation. …

But if the Victorian madwoman looks mutely out from men's pictures, and acts a part men had staged and directed, she is very differently represented in the feminist revision of Ophelia initiated by newly powerful and respectable Victorian actresses, and by women critics of Shakespeare. In their efforts to defend Ophelia, they invent a story for her drawn from their own experiences, grievances, and desires.

... 

Probably the most famous of the Victorian feminist revisions of the Ophelia story was Mary Cowden Clarke's *The Girlhood of Shakespeare's Heroines*, published in 1852. Unlike other Victorian moralizing and didactic studies of the female characters of Shakespeare's plays, Clarke's was specifically addressed to the wrongs of women, and especially to the sexual double standard. In a chapter on Ophelia called "The rose of Elsinore," Clarke tells how the child Ophelia was left behind in the care of a peasant couple when Polonius was called to the court at Paris, and raised in a cottage with a foster-sister and brother, Jutha and Ulf. Jutha is seduced and betrayed by a deceitful knight, and Ophelia discovers the bodies of Jutha and her still-born child, lying "white, rigid, and still" in the deserted parlor of the cottage in the middle of the night. Ulf, a "hairy loutish boy," likes to torture flies, to eat songbirds, and to rip the petals off roses, and he is also very eager to give little Ophelia what he calls a bear-hug. Both repelled and masochistically attracted by Ulf, Ophelia is repeatedly concerned by him as she grows up; once she escapes the hug by hitting him with a branch of wild roses; another time, he sneaks into her bedroom "in his brutish pertinacity to obtain the hug he had promised himself," but just as he bends over her trembling body, Ophelia is saved by the reappearance of her real mother.

A few years later, back at the court, she discovers the hanged body of another friend, who has killed herself after being "victimized and deserted by the same evil seducer." Not surprisingly, Ophelia breaks down with brain fever—a staple mental illness of Victorian fiction—and has prophetic hallucinations of a brook beneath willow trees where something bad will happen to her. The warnings of Polonius and Laertes have little to add to this history of female sexual trauma.

On the Victorian stage, it was Ellen Terry, daring and unconventional in her own life, who led the way in acting Ophelia in feminist terms as a consistent psychological study in sexual intimidation, a girl terrified of her father, of her lover, and of life itself. Terry's debut as Ophelia in Henry Irving's production in 1878 was a landmark. According to one reviewer, her Ophelia was "the terrible spectacle of a normal girl becoming hopelessly imbecile as the result of overwhelming mental agony. Hers was an insanity without wrath or rage, without exaltation or paroxysms." Her "poetic and intellectual performance" also inspired other actresses to rebel against the conventions of invisibility and negation associated with the part.

Terry was the first to challenge the tradition of Ophelia's dressing in emblematic white. For the French poets, such as Rimbaud, Hugo, Musset, Mallarmé and Laforgue, whiteness was part of Ophelia's essential feminine
symbolism; they call her “blanche Ophélia” and compare her to a lily, a cloud, or snow. Yet whiteness also made her a transparency, an absence that took on the colors of Hamlet's moods, and that, for the symbolists like Mallarmé, made her a blank page to be written over or on by the male imagination. Although Irving was able to prevent Terry from wearing black in the mad scene, exclaiming “My God, Madam, there must be only one black figure in this play, and that's Hamlet!” (Irving, of course, was playing Hamlet), nonetheless actresses such as Gertrude Eliot, Helen Maude, Nora de Silva, and in Russia Vera Komisarjevskaya, gradually won the right to intensify Ophelia's presence by clothing her in Hamlet's black.

By the turn of the century, there was both a male and a female discourse on Ophelia. A.C. Bradley spoke for the Victorian male tradition when he noted in *Shakespearean Tragedy* (1906) that “a large number of readers feel a kind of personal irritation against Ophelia; they seem unable to forgive her for not having been a heroine.” The feminist counterview was represented by actresses in such works as Helena Faucit's study of Shakespeare's female characters, and *The True Ophelia*, written by an anonymous actress in 1914, which protested against the “insipid little creature” of criticism, and advocated a strong and intelligent woman destroyed by the heartlessness of men. In women's paintings of the *fin de siècle* as well, Ophelia is depicted as an inspiring, even sanctified emblem of righteousness.

While the widely read and influential essays of Mary Cowden Clarke are now mocked as the epitome of naive criticism, these Victorian studies of the girlhood of Shakespeare's heroines are of course alive and well as psychoanalytic criticism, which has imagined its own prehistories of oedipal conflict and neurotic fixation; and I say this not to mock psychoanalytic criticism, but to suggest that Clarke's musings on Ophelia are a pre-Freudian speculation on the traumatic sources of a female sexual identity. The Freudian interpretation of *Hamlet* concentrated on the hero, but also had much to do with the re-sexualization of Ophelia. As early as 1900, Freud had traced Hamlet's irresolution to an Oedipus complex, and Ernest Jones, his leading British disciple, developed this view, influencing the performances of John Gielgud and Alec Guinness in the 1930s. In his final version of the study, *Hamlet and Oedipus*, published in 1949, Jones argued that “Ophelia should be unmistakably sensual, as she seldom is on stage. She may be ‘innocent’ and docile, but she is very aware of her body.”

In the theater and in criticism, this Freudian edict has produced such extreme readings as that Shakespeare intends us to see Ophelia as a loose woman, and that she has been sleeping with Hamlet. Rebecca West has argued that Ophelia was not “a correct and timid virgin of exquisite sensibilities,” a view she attributes to the popularity of the Millais painting; but rather “a disreputable young woman.” In his delightful autobiography, Laurence Olivier, who made a special pilgrimage to Ernest Jones when he was preparing his *Hamlet* in the 1930s, recalls that one of his predecessors as actor-manager had said in response to the earnest question, “Did Hamlet sleep with Ophelia?”—“In my company, always.”

The most extreme Freudian interpretation reads *Hamlet* as two parallel male and female psychodramas, the counterpointed stories of the incestuous attachments of Hamlet and Ophelia. As Theodor Litz presents this view, while Hamlet is neurotically attached to his mother, Ophelia has an unresolved oedipal attachment to her father. She has fantasies of a lover who will abduct her from or even kill her father, and when this actually happens, her reason is destroyed by guilt as well as by lingering incestuous feelings. According to Litz, Ophelia breaks down because she fails in the female developmental task of shifting her sexual attachment from her father “to a man who can bring her fulfillment as a woman.” We see the effects of this Freudian Ophelia on stage productions since the 1950s, where directors have hinted at an incestuous link between Ophelia and her father, or more recently, because this staging conflicts with the usual ironic treatment of Polonius, between Ophelia and Laertes. Trevor Nunn's production with Helen Mirren in 1970, for example, made Ophelia and Laertes flirtatious doubles, almost twins in their matching fur-trimmed doublets, playing duets on the lute with Polonius looking on, like Peter, Paul, and Mary. In other productions of the same period, Marianne Faithfull was a haggard Ophelia equally attracted to Hamlet and Laertes, and, in one of the few performances directed by a woman, Yvonne Nicholson sat on Laertes' lap in the advice scene, and played...
the part with “rough sexual bravado.”

Since the 1960s, the Freudian representation of Ophelia has been supplemented by an antipsychiatry that represents Ophelia's madness in more contemporary terms. In contrast to the psychoanalytic representation of Ophelia's sexual unconscious that connected her essential femininity to Freud's essays on female sexuality and hysteria, her madness is now seen in medical and biochemical terms, as schizophrenia. This is so in part because the schizophrenic woman has become the cultural icon of dualistic femininity in the mid-twentieth century as the erotomaniac was in the seventeenth and the hyster in the nineteenth. It might also be traced to the work of R.D. Laing on female schizophrenia in the 1960s. Laing argued that schizophrenia was an intelligible response to the experience of invalidation within the family network, especially to the conflicting emotional messages and mystifying double binds experienced by daughters. Ophelia, he noted in The Divided Self, is an empty space. “In her madness there is no one there. … There is no integral selfhood expressed through her actions or utterances. Incomprehensible statements are said by nothing. She has already died. There is now only a vacuum where there was once a person.”

Despite his sympathy for Ophelia, Laing's readings silence her, equate her with “nothing,” more completely than any since the Augustans; and they have been translated into performances which only make Ophelia a graphic study of mental pathology. The sickest Ophelias on the contemporary stage have been those in the productions of the pathologist-director Jonathan Miller. In 1974 at the Greenwich Theatre his Ophelia sucked her thumb; by 1981, at the Warehouse in London, she was played by an actress much taller and heavier than the Hamlet (perhaps punningly cast as the young actor Anton Lesser). She began the play with a set of nervous tics and tuggings of hair which by the mad scene had become a full set of schizophrenic routines—head banging, twitching, wincing, grimacing, and drooling.

But since the 1970s too we have had a feminist discourse which has offered a new perspective on Ophelia's madness as protest and rebellion. For many feminist theorists, the madwoman is a heroine, a powerful figure who rebels against the family and the social order; and the hyster who refuses to speak the language of the patriarchal order, who speaks otherwise, is a sister. In terms of effect on the theater, the most radical application of these ideas was probably realized in Melissa Murray's agitprop play Ophelia, written in 1979 for the English women's theater group “Hormone Imbalance.” In this blank verse retelling of the Hamlet story, Ophelia becomes a lesbian and runs off with a woman servant to join a guerrilla commune.

While I've always regretted that I missed this production, I can't proclaim that this defiant ideological gesture, however effective politically or theatrically, is all that feminist criticism desires, or all to which it should aspire. When feminist criticism chooses to deal with representation, rather than with women's writing, it must aim for a maximum interdisciplinary contextualism, in which the complexity of attitudes towards the feminine can be analyzed in their fullest cultural and historical frame. The alternation of strong and weak Ophelias on the stage, virginal and seductive Ophelias in art, inadequate or oppressed Ophelias in criticism, tells us how these representations have overflowed the text, and how they have reflected the ideological character of their times, erupting as debates between dominant and feminist views in periods of gender crisis and redefinition. The representation of Ophelia changes independently of theories of the meaning of the play or the Prince, for it depends on attitudes towards women and madness. The decorous and pious Ophelia of the Augustan age and the postmodern schizophrenic heroine who might have stepped from the pages of Laing can be derived from the same figure; they are both contradictory and complementary images of female sexuality in which madness seems to act as the “switching-point, the concept which allows the co-existence of both sides of the representation.” There is no “true” Ophelia for whom feminist criticism must unambiguously speak, but perhaps only a Cubist Ophelia of multiple perspectives, more than the sum of all her parts.

But in exposing the ideology of representation, feminist critics have also the responsibility to acknowledge and to examine the boundaries of our own ideological positions as products of our gender and our time. A degree of humility in an age of critical hubris can be our greatest strength, for it is by occupying this position
of historical self-consciousness in both feminism and criticism that we maintain our credibility in representing Ophelia, and that, unlike Lacan, when we promise to speak about her, we make good our word.

Notes


2. Annette Kolodny, “Dancing through the minefield: some observations on the theory, practice, and politics of feminist literary criticism” (Feminist Studies, 6 (1980)), 7.


5. Luce Irigaray: see New French Feminisms, ed. Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron (New York, 1982), 101. The quotation above, from III. ii, is taken from the Arden Shakespeare, Hamlet, ed. Harold Jenkins (London and New York, 1982), 295. All quotations from Hamlet are from this text.


14. On dishevelled hair as a signifier of madness or rape, see Charney and Charney, op. cit., 452-3, 457; and Allan Dessen, Elizabethan Stage Conventions and Modern Interpreters (Cambridge, 1984), 36-8. Thanks to Allan Dessen for letting me see advance proofs of his book.


22. Ibid., 68.

23. Ibid., 72, 75.


28. Ibid., 177-8, 180.
33. Hiatt, op. cit., 114. See also Wingate, op. cit., 304-5.
34. Terry, op. cit., 155-6.
37. Among these paintings are the Ophelias of Henrietta Rae and Mrs F. Littler. Sarah Bernhardt sculpted a bas relief of Ophelia for the Women's Pavilion at the Chicago World's Fair in 1893.
38. Ernest Jones, Hamlet and Oedipus (New York, 1949), 139.
40. Laurence Olivier, Confessions of an Actor (Harmondsworth, 1982), 102, 152.
42. Richard David, Shakespeare in the Theatre (Cambridge, 1978), 75. This was the production directed by Buzz Goodbody, a brilliant young feminist radical who killed herself that year. See Colin Chambers, Other Spaces: New Theatre and the RSC (London, 1980), especially 63-7.
43. R.D. Laing, The Divided Self (Harmondsworth, 1965), 195n.
44. David, op. cit., 82-3; thanks to Marianne DeKoven, Rutgers University, for the description of the 1981 Warehouse production.
45. See, for example, Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément, La Jeune Née (Paris, 1975).
46. For an account of this production, see Micheline Wandor, Understudies: Theatre and Sexual Politics (London, 1981), 47.
47. I am indebted for this formulation to a critique of my earlier draft of this paper by Carl Friedman, at the Wesleyan Center for the Humanities, April 1984.

Criticism: Gender Issues: Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor
(essay date 1996)


[In the following essay, Thompson and Taylor review the shifting critical attitudes to the female characters in Hamlet.]

‘A female Hamlet is one thing but a pregnant prince is quite another’ says Dora Chance in Angela Carter's novel Wise Children (1991). Dora and her identical twin sister Nora are stars of vaudeville and illegitimate daughters of Sir Melchior Hazard, the great Shakespearean actor. The novel contains many references to Hamlet, including the moment when the hero's most celebrated soliloquy becomes the inspiration for a song and dance routine with the two sisters dressed as bellhops in a hotel corridor, debating whether a package should be delivered to ‘2b or not 2b’ (p. 90). The pregnant prince (in this case Dora's and Nora's grandmother Estella Hazard, pregnant with their natural father Melchior and his twin brother Peregrine, who passes for

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their father) belongs to the level of subversive fantasy and the cheerful appropriation of Shakespeare's texts by twentieth-century low culture, but in fact the notion of Hamlet as female has a lengthy history in the critical and theatrical reception of the play.

Hamlet himself, … sees his inaction in general and his verbosity in particular as effeminate in his soliloquy after his first encounter with the Players:

Why, what an ass am I! This is most brave,
That I, the son of a dear father murthered,
Prompted to my revenge by heaven and hell,
Must like a whore unpack my heart with words,
And fall a-cursing like a very drab.

(II. ii. 582-6)

As Patricia Parker points out in Literary Fat Ladies,

In the traditional opposition of genders in which ‘Women are words, men deeds’, Hamlet's comparison of his verbal and deedless delay to the impotent anger of a ‘drab’ [prostitute] sets up a link between his entire period of inactivity and delay and womanish wordiness, in contrast to such one-dimensional emblems of masculinity as Laertes and the aptly named Fort-in-bras [strong-in-arms].

(1987, p. 23)

Much later, just before the fatal duel with Laertes, Hamlet dismisses his sense of ‘how ill all's here about my heart’ as ‘such a kind of gaingiving [misgiving], as would perhaps trouble a woman’ (V. ii. 212-16). He sees his own behaviour and his capacity for feeling as more appropriate to a woman than to a man, but is behaving and feeling like a woman the same as being a woman? Fears about Hamlet's apparent lack of essential masculinity have often been expressed by critics who focus on his weakness, his vacillation, his melancholy—all seen as feminine traits. Goethe was apparently the first to say that Hamlet was ‘part woman’, and an extensive critical tradition draws on what now looks like fairly crude gender stereotyping to perpetuate this point. It came to a climax in 1881 with the publication of Edward P. Vining's book The Mystery of Hamlet, which developed the theory that in revising his play Shakespeare dallied with the idea that Hamlet was in fact born female and was educated from infancy to impersonate a male. This book inspired the fine silent film version directed in Germany by Sven Gade and Heinz Schall in 1920 in which Asta Nielsen played the hero precisely as a princess passed off as a prince by her mother, anxious to secure the succession when it is feared just as she is giving birth that Old Hamlet has been killed by Old Fortinbras. …

Those who have written about this film, both when it was released and more recently, have insisted on its distance from Shakespeare, though it is in fact closer to the text than they allow, and provides some fascinating reflections on gender issues in the play. But on the stage too a large number of women have acted Hamlet (as a man, that is), from Sarah Siddons in 1776 and Elizabeth Edmead in 1792 to at least Frances de la Tour in 1979 and Diane Venora in 1983. And these were not necessarily seen as freakish or one-off performances: Siddons played Hamlet in Birmingham, Manchester, Liverpool, Bristol, and Dublin between 1776 and 1802, while Millicent Bandmann-Palmer performed the part over a thousand times from 1887 to 1902; she is referred to in James Joyce's Ulysses when John Eglinton tells Stephen Daedalus that ‘an actress played Hamlet for the fourhundredandeighth time last night in Dublin’. There was serious acclaim for actresses such as Charlotte Cushman (from 1848), Alice Marriott (from 1861) and Sarah Bernhardt (from 1899) in the role during the nineteenth century (see Jill Edmonds, ‘Princess Hamlet’, in Gardner and Rutherford, eds., The New Woman and Her Sisters, 1992).
Many of these women were in the position of actor-managers and could choose to play Hamlet simply because it was the best part available, but they also exploited what was seen as a feminine ability to convey the interiority of the character and to do justice to Hamlet's romantic sensitivity. The dominant view of Hamlet as a poetic dreamer, played even by male actors as an aesthetic, even pre-Raphaelite figure, no doubt helped to make these interpretations acceptable. Eugène Delacroix apparently used a female model for his lithographs of Hamlet in 1834-45. … (see Foakes, ‘Hamlet versus Lear’, 1993, p. 23). By 1979 however Frances de la Tour's performance was admired for quite different qualities. As one reviewer put it: ‘She is tough, abrasive, virile and impassioned. Indeed it's a good performance compact with every female virtue except femininity’ (Michael Billington, The Guardian, 20 October 1979). Asked about the phenomenon of women playing Hamlet fifteen years later, de la Tour herself explained:

*I think it is because it is universal youth, expressing all the emotions of youth and of life, and there isn't another part to match it … There would be no need and no desire for a woman to play Lear. It's not the same as Hamlet.*

*(The Observer Review Extra, 9 October 1994, and BBC2 programme Playing the Dane, broadcast 30 October 1994)*

But Hamlet's own misogyny remains an issue. ‘Frailty, thy name is woman!’ he says (I. ii. 146) when he is left alone on stage at the end of the second scene of the play to reflect on the speed with which his widowed mother has married his uncle. Later he exclaims ‘O most pernicious woman!’ (I. v. 105) on hearing the Ghost's tale of Gertrude's ‘falling off’ from the ‘celestial bed’ of her first marriage to the ‘garbage’ and ‘damned incest’ of her second (I. v. 56-7, 83). Similarly, he feels betrayed by Ophelia who in obedience to her father rejects his attentions and returns his letters and gifts. Reserving his idealization for men (his dead father and Horatio), he attacks both women vehemently, Ophelia in the ‘nunnery’ scene (III. i) and Gertrude in the ‘closet’ scene (III. iv), on both occasions evoking a somewhat baffled response in so far as the women do not seem to be absolutely clear what they are being accused of. Some editors and directors have felt it necessary to bring Hamlet onstage early in III. i so that he overhears Polonius and the King plotting to spy on him and his anger against Ophelia becomes motivated by her complicity in this. Ophelia herself clearly cannot understand his attitude but can only attribute it to madness (III. i. 151-62).

Gertrude, three scenes later, admits and regrets what she has already described as her ‘o'erhasty marriage’ (II. ii. 57), but seems sincerely shocked—‘As kill a king!’ (III. iv. 30)—by her son's suggestion that she was actually implicated in the murder of her first husband. Curiously, they neither of them pursue this more serious charge which is also implied by the Player Queen's line ‘None wed the second but who killed the first’ (III. ii. 180), while the Ghost's repeated admonitions to Hamlet to ‘Leave her to heaven’ (I. v. 86) and to ‘step between her and her fighting soul’ (III. iv. 113) would seem if anything to attest to Gertrude's relative innocence. The focus is instead on Hamlet's disgust at his mother's sexual activity ‘In the rank sweat of an enseamed bed’ (III. iv. 92) and his insistence that she begin to practise celibacy: ‘Let not the bloat king tempt you again to bed’ (III. iv. 182).

Hamlet's priggish attitude here—‘You cannot call it love, for at your age / The heyday in the blood is tame, it's humble, / And waits upon the judgment’ (III. iv. 68-70) has been endorsed by critics and editors who worry about Gertrude's age, and indeed Hamlet's since, as they see it, if he is really thirty as the Gravedigger says (V. i. 142-62), she must be too old to excite the King's interest. It seems typical of her opacity as a character, or perhaps of the play's refusal to present her other than through Hamlet's eyes, that we do not know what impact this conversation has on her. While she seems to accept Hamlet's harsh judgement in this scene, and to be prepared to obey his commands and keep his secrets, her relationship with the King through the remainder of the play seems unchanged—or at least there is no clear indication in the text that they have become estranged, though some productions do play it in this way. Nor is it clear why in the last scene she becomes what Janet Adelman calls...
a wonderfully homey presence for her son, newly available to him as the loving and protective mother of his childhood, worrying about his condition, wiping his face as he fights, even perhaps intentionally drinking the poison intended for him.

(Suffocating Mothers, 1992, p. 34)

The fact that this last suggestion has been made quite often, again without any clear warrant from the text, seems an indication of how baffled critics are by Gertrude. It is also an option in the stage tradition, though it is quite a challenge for the performer to convey this intention to the audience by meaningful looks at a point when attention is more likely to be focused on Hamlet. Nineteenth-century Gertrudes sometimes said ‘I have [drunk]’ rather than ‘I will’, apparently to soften the act of deliberate disobedience to the King, and even then might be sent offstage to die. The entire role was severely and quite consistently cut from 1755 to 1900 (and frequently after that) in such a way as to eliminate any possibility of Gertrude being affected by the closet scene encounter with Hamlet (see O’Brien, ‘Revision by Excision’, in Shakespeare Survey 45, 1992). The 1920 film goes to the other extreme from the self-sacrificing mother in having Gertrude deliberately prepare the poison for her daughter Hamlet who has by this time already been responsible for the death of the King.

The extent and nature of the guilt projected on to Gertrude and by association on to Ophelia and indeed all women has much exercised the play’s psychoanalytic critics. Freud saw Hamlet as a hysteric and many Freudians have offered interpretations which tease out parricidal or matricidal motives. Ernest Jones provided the classic Oedipal reading of the play in 1949, arguing that Hamlet is unable to kill the King because he represents the fulfilment of Hamlet's own repressed erotic desire for his mother. In her essay on ‘Sexuality in the Reading of Shakespeare’ (in Drakakis, ed., Alternative Shakespeares) Jacqueline Rose traces how influential male readers of the play—T.S. Eliot as well as Ernest Jones and the Freudians—have echoed Hamlet's misogyny and blamed Gertrude for what they saw as the aesthetic and moral failings of the play overall. Picking up on Eliot's analogy for Hamlet as ‘the Mona Lisa of literature’, she argues that in his reading

the question of the woman and the question of meaning go together. The problem with Hamlet is not just that the emotion it triggers is unmanageable and cannot be contained by the woman who is its cause, but that this excess of affect produces a problem of interpretation: how to read, or control by reading, a play whose inscrutability (like that of the Mona Lisa) has baffled—and seduced—so many critics.

(pp. 97-8)

Femininity itself becomes the problem within the play, and within attempts to interpret it, but paradoxically femininity is also seen as the source of creativity and the very principle of the aesthetic process in other psychoanalytic readings in which the focus shifts from character to author: Shakespeare, unlike his hero, can be claimed to have effected a productive reconciliation with the feminine in his own nature.

Modern male editors of the play are not necessarily more enlightened when it comes to talking about the women. Harold Jenkins remarks condescendingly of Ophelia that, rejected by Hamlet, she has ‘little left to do … but to bewail her virginity … Her tragedy of course is that Hamlet has left her treasure with her’ (Arden 2, pp. 151-2). G.R. Hibbard quotes this approvingly, adding that, as a virgin, she dies ‘unfulfilled’. Moreover, he says, ‘It is Ophelia's tragic fate to pay the price in pain and suffering for Gertrude's sins’ (this despite the fact that he is very confident she was not privy to the murder), and goes on, ‘Woman's sexuality has evidently become an obsession with Hamlet; and to this extent at least he is genuinely mad’ (Oxford edition, p. 51). Surely such a definition of madness would include a sizeable proportion of the men in any given audience of the play?
The fate of Ophelia, specifically the scene of her drowning (‘There is a willow grows askaunt the brook’) is paradoxically one of the most vivid, iconic moments in the play. … Paradoxically, because it is not of course staged but rather described by Gertrude in elaborate detail (IV. vii. 166-83), shocking perhaps to the naturalistically trained ‘modern reader [who] cannot suppress his astonishment that Gertrude should have watched Ophelia die without lifting a finger to help her’ (Edwards, New Cambridge edition, 1985, p. 212). It has become familiar through decorative, dreamy paintings such as the one by John Everett Millais in the Tate Gallery in London, and it does tend to be represented in film and video versions of the play; Eleuterio Rodolfi was clearly inspired by Millais for the depiction of the death of Ophelia in his 1917 film (which has Pre-Raphaelite decor throughout), as was Olivier in 1948. Unfortunately, suicide by drowning has also become a typically feminine death, both in real life, from Mary Wollstonecraft's failed attempt in 1795 to Virginia Woolf's successful one in 1941, and in fiction, from the Jailer's Daughter (another failed attempt) in Fletcher's and Shakespeare's The Two Noble Kinsmen in 1614 to Edna Pontellier in Kate Chopin's The Awakening (1899) and beyond.

In his identification of the ‘Ophelia complex’ Gaston Bachelard discussed the symbolic connections between women, water, and death, seeing drowning as an appropriate merging into the female element for women who are always associated with liquids: blood, milk, tears, and amniotic fluid. Moreover, as Elaine Showalter has demonstrated, the particular circumstances of Ophelia's madness have made her ‘a potent and obsessive figure in our cultural mythology’: she represents a powerful archetype in which female insanity and female sexuality are inextricably intertwined. Men may go mad for a number of reasons, including mental and spiritual stress, but women's madness is relentlessly associated with their bodies and their erotic desires. As Showalter notes, melancholy was a fashionable disease (or attitude) among young men in London from about 1580, but it was associated with intellectual and imaginative genius in them, whereas ‘women's melancholy was seen instead as biological and emotional in its origins’ (‘Representing Ophelia’ in Parker and Hartman, eds., Shakespeare and the Question of Theory, 1985, p. 81). The very word ‘hysteria’ implies a female, physiological condition, originating as it does from Greek ‘hystera’ meaning womb. King Lear, fighting off his own impending madness, equates ‘Hysterica passio’ with the medical condition involving feelings of suffocation and giddiness known as ‘the mother’ (II. iv. 56-7). (See also Juliana Schiesari, The Gendering of Melancholia, 1992.)

On stage and in critical reception, Showalter argues that ‘the representation of Ophelia changes independently of theories of the meaning of the play or the Prince, for it depends on attitudes towards women and madness’ (pp. 91-2). She traces how stereotypes of female insanity affected the staging of the mad scene (IV. v), from sentimentalized Augustan versions through intense Romanticism to Pre-Raphaelite wistfulness. Post-Freudian Ophelias have signalled an incestuous interest in Polonius or Laertes, while the most recent performers have indicated schizophrenia, either as a serious mental illness or (in a feminist appropriation of the work of R.D. Laing) as an intelligible response to the experience of invalidation or the double bind within the family network.

When the well-known American feminist Carolyn Heilbrun reprinted her essay on ‘Hamlet's Mother’ in 1990 and used it as the lead piece in her book Hamlet's Mother and Other Women, she noted that when she first published it in 1957 she was ‘a feminist critic waiting for a cause to join’. Her basic line in the essay was that critics and readers of the play have been too ready to accept Hamlet's view of Gertrude without questioning whether the overall view taken by the play (or its author) might be different. Many have joined the cause since 1975, the publication date of Juliet Dusinberre's Shakespeare and the Nature of Women, the first full-length feminist study of Shakespeare, and the date selected by Philip C. Kolin as the starting point for his annotated bibliography of Shakespeare and Feminist Criticism which lists forty-four items relating to Hamlet published between 1975 and his cut-off point in 1988. (More have of course appeared since.) This total is lower than those for The Merchant of Venice (forty-eight), As You Like It (fifty), The Winter's Tale (fifty-eight) and Othello (sixty-nine), and only just ahead of The Taming of the Shrew (forty-three), testifying to the prominence given to comedy in this period of feminist criticism, and the dominance of Othello amongst the
tragedies. (*King Lear* gets thirty-eight items, *Antony and Cleopatra* thirty-four, and *Macbeth* thirty-three.)

Most of the items on *Hamlet* in these first thirteen years of feminist criticism are studies of the female characters—of Gertrude as a rare and problematic example of a Shakespearian mother, and of Ophelia as a victim, weak and silenced. This last adjective is perhaps surprising, given the extent to which her discovery of a voice in her madness causes the other characters considerable stress and embarrassment, but the obscenity and sexual innuendo in Ophelia's songs has still not been properly addressed by feminist critics although they are surely not as worried by it as nineteenth-century readers who felt the need to invent rustic wet-nurses for Ophelia's childhood (like the Nurse in *Romeo and Juliet*) to account for her knowledge of such things.

Some more general essays discuss the larger issues of femininity and masculinity in the play, covering such areas as the supposed effeminacy of Hamlet himself and the desire for male bonding, especially in Hamlet's relationship with Horatio. Many of the authors (especially those from North America) could be described as psychoanalytic critics as well as feminist critics and they are concerned to investigate the overlapping territories of language, fantasy, and sexuality. This emphasis has continued in post-1988 writing, though, … recent feminist critics have also been concerned with questions of history and staging.

Given that the majority of students of literature today are female as well as an increasing number of their teachers, it is probably the case that feminist critics have been responsible for the reordering of the canon, whereby a play like *Hamlet* with its relatively simplistic views of women as angels or whores becomes less interesting as a text to teach and/or write about. We are perhaps more critical of crude gender stereotypes, and while this can make for more interesting performances by actors who can allow Hamlet to be sensitive as well as virile without making the two mutually exclusive, students today (male as well as female) find it more difficult to empathize with a hero who seems so casual in his cruelty to the women in his life.

On a more positive note, the present critical climate may offer more scope for investigation of the phenomenon whereby Hamlet has been seen as effeminate in the past partly because he was seen as an intellectual: for a man to be intellectual was to be womanish, while at the same time it certainly did not follow that actual women were seen as intellectual, or that intellectual women were seen as anything other than unnatural. It should be possible for modern feminist critics to reassess at least this aspect of gender stereotyping in a more positive way as they both analyse and contribute to the extraordinarily rich afterlife of the play.

## Criticism: Language And Imagery: Richard A. Lanham (essay date 1976)


*In the following essay, originally published in 1976, Lanham traces the use of rhetoric in *Hamlet* and investigates the relation between elaborate and theatrical rhetoric in the play.*

Shakespeare uses a variation on the sonnets strategy in *Hamlet.* He writes two plays in one. Laertes plays the revenge-tragedy hero straight. He does, true enough, veer toward self-parody, as when he complains that crying for Ophelia has interfered with his rants: “I have a speech o’ fire, that fain would blaze / But that this folly drowns it” (4.7.189-90). But he knows his generic duty and does it. No sooner has his “good old man” (Polonius's role in the straight, “serious” play) been polished off than he comes screaming with a rabble army. He delivers predictably and suitably stupid lines like “O thou vile king, / Give me my father” (4.5.115-16). And the Queen can scarcely manage a “Calmly, good Laertes” before he begins again: “That drop of blood that's calm proclaims me bastard, / Cries cuckold to my father, brands the harlot / Even here between the
chaste unsmirched brows / Of my true mother” (4.5.117-20). And just before the King begins to calm him, to the villainous contentation of both: “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!” (4.5.130-32). He plays a straight, hard-charging revenge-hero.

Against him, Ophelia reenacts a delightfully tear-jerking madwoman stage prop. The King mouths kingly platitudes well enough (“There's such divinity doth hedge a king …” [4.5.123]), comes up with a suitably stagey, two-phase fail-safe plot, and urges the hero on (“Revenge should have no bounds”). And the whole comes suitably laced with moralizing guff. So the King plays a Polonius-of-the-leading-questions: “Laertes, was your father dear to you?” Laertes, with unusual common sense, returns, “Why ask you this?” And then the King is off for a dozen Polonian lines on love's alteration by time: “Not that I think you did not love your father, / But that I know love is begun by time …” 4.7.109-10. Only then can he get back to, as he phrases it, “the quick o’ th’ ulcer.” And the Queen plays out a careful scene on the brookside where Ophelia drowned. And wrestling in Ophelia's grave, Hamlet, annoyed at being upstaged by Laertes, protests, “I'll rant as well as thou.” And, as superb finale, Laertes, at the fencing match, stands there prating about honor with the poisoned rapier in his hand. The poisoner-poisoned motif releases the Christian forgiveness that forgives us, too, for enjoying all that blood. Hamlet offers, then, a story frankly calculated to make the audience as well as the compositor run out of exclamation points.

Hamlet obligingly confesses himself Laertes' foil. “In mine ignorance / Your skill shall, like a star i'th'darkest night, / Stick fiery off indeed” (5.2.244-46). It is the other way about, of course. Laertes foils for Hamlet. Shakespeare is up to his old chiasmatic business, writing a play about the kind of play he is writing. The main play overlaps as well as glossing the play criticized—again, a strategy of superposition. Polonius plays a muddling old proverb-monger, and a connoisseur of language, in the Hamlet play, as well as good old man in the Laertes play. Ophelia, though sentimental from the start, is both more naive and more duplicitous in the Hamlet play; and so with the King and Queen, too, both are more complex figures. Shakespeare endeavors especially to wire the two plots in parallel: two avenging sons and two dead fathers; brother's murder and “this brother's wager”; both Hamlet and Laertes in love with Ophelia; both dishonest before the duel (Hamlet pretending more madness than he displays when he kills Polonius), and so on.

Now there is no doubt about how to read the Laertes play: straight revenge tragedy, to be taken—as I've tried to imply in my summary—without solemnity. We are to enjoy the rants as rants. When we get tears instead of a rant, as with the Laertes instance cited earlier, an apology for our disappointment does not come amiss. We are not to be caught up in Laertes' vigorous feeling any more than in Ophelia's bawdy punning. We savor it. We don't believe the fake King when he maunders on about Divine Right, the divinity that doth hedge a king. We don't “believe” anybody. It is not that kind of play. For explanation, neither the ketchup nor the verbal violence need go further than enjoyment. The more outrageous the stage effects, the more ghastly the brutality, the more grotesque the physical mutilation, the better such a play becomes. Shakespeare had done this kind of thing already and knew what he was about. Such a vehicle packed them in. Just so, when part-sales were falling, would Dickens kill a baby.

The real doubt comes when we ask, “What poetic do we bring to the Hamlet play?” As several of its students have pointed out, it is a wordy play. Eloquence haunts it. Horatio starts the wordiness by supplying a footnote from ancient Rome in the first scene, by improving the occasion with informative reflection. Everybody laughs at Polonius for his moralizing glosses but Hamlet is just as bad. Worse. Gertrude asks him, in the second scene, why he grieves to excess and he gives us a disquisition on seeming and reality in grief. The King follows with his bravura piece on grief. Everybody moralizes the pageant. The Hamlet play abounds with triggers for straight revenge-tragedy response. The whole “mystery” of Hamlet's hesitant revenge boils down to wondering why he doesn't go ahead and play his traditional part, complete with the elegant rants we know he can deliver.
The rhetorical attitude is triggered not only by obvious stylistic excess, as we have seen, or by *de trop* moralizing, but by talking about language, by surface reference to surface. This surface reference occurs at every level of the Hamlet play in *Hamlet*, as well as, of course, throughout the Laertes play. Polonius plays a main part here. His tedious prolixity ensures that we notice everyone else's tedious prolixity. And his relish of language, his speech for its own sake, makes us suspect the same appetite in others and in ourselves. The Queen's rejoinder to the marvelous "brevity is the soul of wit" speech in 2.2 could be addressed to almost anybody in the play, including the gravedigger: "More matter, with less art."

Everyone is manipulating everyone else with speechifying and then admitting he has done so. Every grand rhetorical occasion seems no sooner blown than blasted. Polonius offers the famous Gielgud encore about being true to oneself and then sends off Reynaldo to spy and tell fetching lies. The King play king to angry Laertes then confesses to Gertrude that he has been doing just this. Ophelia is staked out to play innocent maiden so Hamlet can be drawn out and observed. *Hic et ubique*. Is she a stage contrivance or a character? What kind of audience are we to be? Everyone is an actor, Hamlet and his madness most of all. The play is full of minor invitations to attend the surface, the theme of speaking. Even the ghost has to remind himself to be brief—before continuing for thirty-odd lines (1.5). Theatrical gestures are not simply used all the time but described, as in Hamlet's inky cloak and windy suspiration for grief, or the costuming and gesture of the distracted lover, as the innocent Ophelia describes Hamlet's visit:

```
My lord, as I was sewing in my closet,
Lord Hamlet, with his doublet all unbraced,
No hat upon his head, his stockings fouled,
Ungartered, and down-gyved to his ankle,
Pale as his shirt, his knees knocking each other,
And with a look so piteous in purport
As if he had been loosèd out of hell
To speak of horrors—he comes before me.
.....He took me by the wrist and held me hard.
Then goes he to the length of all his arm,
And with his other hand thus o'er his brow
He falls to such perusal of my face
As 'a would draw it. Long stayed he so.
At last, a little shaking of mine arm
And thrice his head thus waving up and down,
He raised a sigh so piteous and profound
As it did seem to shatter all his bulk
And end his being. That done, he lets me go,
And with his head over his shoulder turned
He seemed to find his way without his eyes,
For out o'doors he went without their helps
And to the last bended their light on me.
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(2.1.77-84, 87-100)

This might have come from an actor's manual. Do we take it as such, respond as professional actors?

The Hamlet play turns in on itself most obviously when the players visit. Dramatic self-consciousness retrogresses a step further as the tragedians of the city talk about themselves doing what they are just now doing in a play depicting them doing just what. ... The debate is about rightful succession, of course, like both the Laertes and the Hamlet plays. "What, are they children? Who maintains 'em? How are they escoted? Will they pursue the quality no longer than they can sing? Will they not say afterwards, if they should grow themselves to common players (as it is most like, if their means are no better), their writers do them wrong to make them exclaim against their own succession?" (2.2.338-44). Who are the children in the "real" plays? Hamlet had invoked a typical cast a few lines earlier (314 ff.) such as *Hamlet* itself uses and stressed that "he that plays the king shall be welcome." Hamlet will use the play, that is, *as a weapon*, the propaganda side of
rhetorical poetic, to complement the Polonius-pleasure side. But before that, there is a rehearsal, for effect, to see whether the players are good enough to play the play within the play. Here, even more clearly than in the Laertes play, we confront the connoisseur's attitude toward language. Polonius supplies a chorus that for once fits: “Fore God, my lord, well spoken, with good accent and good discretion” (2.2.454-55). This to Hamlet, a good actor, as Polonius was in his youth. They proceed in this vein, nibbling the words; “That's good. ‘Mobled queen’ is good.”

The main question pressing is not, How does the feedback work? What relation is there, for example, between rugged Pyrrhus and Hamlet, or Laertes? Or what relation with the King, who also topples a kingdom? And why is Hamlet so keen to reach Hecuba? The main question is, How does all this connoisseurship affect the “serious” part of Hamlet? Hamlet is one of the great tragedies. It has generated more comment than any other written document in English literature, one would guess, reverent, serious comment on it as a serious play. Yet finally can we take any of its rhetoric seriously? If so, how much and when? The play is full of the usual release mechanisms for the rhetorical poetic. And, at the end, the Laertes play is there as stylistic control, to mock us if we have made the naive response. But what is the sophisticated response?

Hamlet focuses the issue, and the play, the plays, when he finally gets to Hecuba. He who has been so eager for a passionate speech is yet surprised when it comes and when it seizes the player:

```
O, what a rogue and peasant slave am I!
Is it not monstrous that this player here,
But in a fiction, in a dream of passion,
Could force his soul so to his own conceit
That from her working all his visage wanned,
Tears in his eyes, distraction in his aspect,
A broken voice, and his whole function suiting
With forms to his conceit? And all for nothing,
For Hecuba!
What's Hecuba to him, or he to Hecuba,
That he should weep for her? What would he do
Had he the motive and the cue for passion
That I have?
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(2.2.534-46)

Hamlet makes the point that dances before us in every scene. Dramatic, rhetorical motive is stronger than “real,” serious motive. Situation prompts feeling in this play, rather than the other way round. Feelings are not real until played. Drama, ceremony, is always needed to authenticate experience. On the battlements Hamlet—with ghostly reinforcement—makes his friends not simply swear but make a big scene of it. Laertes keeps asking for more ceremonies for Ophelia’s burial and is upset by his father's hugger-mugger interment. Hamlet plays and then breaks off (“Something too much of this”) a stoic friendship scene with Horatio in 3.2. The stronger, the more genuine the feeling, the greater the need to display it.

The answer, then, to “What would he do … ?” is, presumably, “Kill the King!”? Not at all. “He would drown the stage with tears / And cleave the general ear with horrid speech” (2.2.546-47). He would rant even better. And this Hamlet himself, by way of illustration, goes on to do:

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Yet I,
A dull and muddy-mettled rascal, peak
Like John-a-dreams, unpregnant of my cause,
And can say nothing. No, not for a king,
Upon whose property and most dear life
A damned defeat was made. Am I a coward?
Who calls me villain? breaks my pate across?
Plucks off my beard and blows it in my face?
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Tweaks me by the nose? gives me the lie i'th'throat
As deep as to the lungs? Who does me this?
Ha, 'swounds, I should take it, for it cannot be
But I am pigeon-livered and lack gall
To make oppression bitter, or ere this
I should ha' fatted all the region kites
With this slave's offal. Bloody, bawdy villain!
Remorseless, treacherous, lecherous, kindless villain!
O, vengeance!

(2.2.551-67)

Hamlet is here having a fine time dining off his own fury, relishing his sublime passion. He gets a bit confused, to be sure: saying nothing is not his problem. If somebody did call him villain or pluck his beard it would be better, for his grievance would then find some dramatic equivalent, would become real enough to act upon. But he enjoys himself thoroughly. He also sees himself clearly, or at least clearly enough to voice our opinion of his behavior: “Why, what an ass am I! This is most brave, / That I, the son of a dear father murdered, / Prompted to my revenge by heaven and hell, / Must like a whore unpack my heart with words” (2.2.568-71).

Hamlet is one of the most appealing characters the mind of man has ever created but he really is a bit of an ass, and not only here but all through the play. He remains incorrigibly dramatic. Do we like him because he speaks to our love of dramatic imposture? Because his solution, once he has seen his own posturing as such, is not immediate action but more playing? “I'll have these players / Play something like the murder of my father / Before mine uncle” (2.2.580-82). Playing is where we will find reality, find the truth. The play works, of course, tells Hamlet again what he already knows, has had a spirit come specially from purgatory to tell him. But that is not the point. Or rather, that is the point insofar as this is a serious play. The rhetorical purpose is to sustain reality until yet another dramatic contrivance—ship, grave scene, duel—can sustain it yet further.

We saw in the sonnets how a passage can invoke opaque attitudes by logical incongruity. Something of the sort happens in the scene after this speech, the “To be or not to be” centerpiece. Plays flourish within plays here, too, of course. The King and Polonius dangle Ophelia as bait and watch. Hamlet sees this. He may even be, as W.A. Bebbington suggested, reading the “To be or not to be” speech from a book, using it, literally, as a stage prop to bemuse the spiers-on, convince them of his now-become-suicidal madness. No one in his right mind will fault the poetry. But it is irrelevant to anything that precedes. It fools Ophelia—no difficult matter—but it should not fool us. The question is whether Hamlet will act directly or through drama? Not at all. Instead, is he going to end it in the river? I put it thus familiarly to penetrate the serious numinosity surrounding this passage. Hamlet anatomizes grievance for all time. But does he suffer these grievances? He has a complaint indeed against the King and one against Ophelia. Why not do something about them instead of meditating on suicide? If the book is a stage prop, or the speech a trap for the hidden listeners, of course, the question of relevancy doesn't arise. The speech works beautifully. But we do not usually consider it a rhetorical trick. It is the most serious speech in the canon. But is it? It tells us nothing about Hamlet except what we already know—he is a good actor. Its relevance, in fact, may lurk just here. The real question by this point in the play is exactly this one: Is Hamlet or not? Or does he just act? What kind of self does he possess?

The whole play, we know, seeks authenticity, reality behind the arras, things as they are. Hamlet, we are to assume, embodies the only true self, the central self amidst a cast of wicked phonies. The play, seen this way, provided a natural delight for both the Victorians and the existentialists; their sentimentalism about the central self ran the same way. Yet the question really is whether Hamlet is to be, to act rather than reenact. Much has been written on the Melancholy-Man-in-the-Renaissance and how his problems apply to Hamlet. Much more has been written on Hamlet's paralysis. Yet, how irrelevant all this commentary is to the real problem, not what Hamlet's motive is but what kind of motive. Why can't he act? Angels and ministers of grace, he does
nothing else. Polonius, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, Laertes, Claudius, all go to it. But Hamlet never breaks through to “reality.” His motives and his behavior remain dramatic from first to last. So, in spite of all those bodies at the end, commentators wonder if Hamlet amounts to a tragedy and, if so, what kind. Hamlet lacks the serious, central self tragedy requires. We are compelled to stand back, hold off our identification, and hence to locate the play within rhetorical coordinates, a tragicomedy about the two kinds of self and the two kinds of motive.

We see this theme in that Q2 scene (4.4) where Fortinbras and his army parade, with seeming irrelevance—at least to many directors, who cut it—across the stage. They parade so that Hamlet can reflect upon them. The theme is motive. The scene begins as a straightforward lesson in the vanity of human wishes. They go, the Captain tells Hamlet, “to gain a little patch of ground / That hath in it no profit but the name” (4.4.18-19). Hamlet seems to get the point, “the question of this straw,” the absurd artificiality of human motive, and especially of aristocratic war, war for pleasure, for the pure glory of it. But then out jumps another non sequitur soliloquy:

How all occasions do inform against me
And spur my dull revenge! What is a man,
If his chief good and market of his time
Be but to sleep and feed? A beast, no more.
Sure he that made us with such large discourse,
Looking before and after, gave us not
That capability and godlike reason
To fust in us unused. Now, whether it be
Bestial oblivion, or some craven scruple
Of thinking too precisely on th' event—
A thought which, quartered, hath but one part wisdom
And ever three parts coward—I do not know
Why yet I live to say, “This thing's to do,”
Sith I have cause, and will, and strength, and means
To do't.

(4.4.32-46)

What has reason to do with revenge? His question—why, with all his compelling reasons, doesn't he go on—is again well taken. Shakespeare has carefully given him the realest reasons a revenge hero ever had—father murdered, mother whored, kingdom usurped, his innocent maiden corrupted in her imagination. The answer to Hamlet's question marches about on the stage before him. As usual, he does not fully understand the problem. It is the Player King's tears all over again. Fortinbras's motivation is sublimely artificial, entirely dramatic. Honor. It has no profit in it but the name. Hamlet cannot act because he cannot find a way to dramatize his revenge. Chances he has, but, as when he surprises Claudius praying, they are not dramatic. Claudius is alone. To fall upon him and kill him would not be revenge, as he says, not because Claudius will die shriven but because he will not see it coming, because nobody is watching.

So, when Hamlet continues his soliloquy, he draws a moral precisely opposite to the expected one. Again, logical discontinuity triggers stylistic attitude:

Witness this army of such mass and charge,
Led by a delicate and tender prince,
Whose spirit, with divine ambition puffed,
Makes mouths at the invisible event,
Exposing what is mortal and unsure
To all that fortune, death, and danger dare,
Even for an eggshell. Rightly to be great
Is not to stir without great argument,
But greatly to find quarrel in a straw
When honor's at the stake. How stand I then,
That have a father killed, a mother stained,
Excitements of my reason and my blood,
And let all sleep, while to my shame I see
The imminent death of twenty thousand men
That for a fantasy and trick of fame
Go to their graves like beds, fight for a plot
Whereon the numbers cannot try the cause,
Which is not tomb enough and continent
To hide the slain? O, from this time forth,
My thoughts be bloody, or be nothing worth!

(4.4.46-66)

He sees but does not see. In some way, Fortinbras represents where he wants to go, what he wants to be, how he wants to behave. But he doesn't see how, nor altogether do we. If ever an allegorical puppet was dragged across a stage it is Fortinbras. Yet he haunts the play. His divine ambition begins the action of the play; he gets that offstage introduction Shakespeare is so fond of; he marches to Norway to make a point about motive; and he marches back at the end, inherits Denmark. Yet he stays cardboard. It is not real motive he represents but martial honor much rather.

Shakespeare sought to give Hamlet a pronounced military coloration from first to last. The play begins on guard; the ghost wears armor; Denmark is a most warlike state. Military honor is the accepted motive in a Denmark Fortinbras rightly inherits. Honor will cure what is rotten in Denmark, restore its proper values. Hamlet cannot set the times right because he cannot find in martial honor a full and sufficient motive for human life. Hamlet, says Fortinbras, would have done well had he been king, but we may be permitted to doubt it. He thinks too much. Yet honor and the soldier's life provide the model motive for Hamlet. All his working life, Shakespeare was fascinated and perplexed by how deeply the military motive satisfied man. It constituted a sublime secular commitment which, like the religious commitment, gave all away to get all back. Hamlet's selfconsciousness keeps him from it, yes, but even more his search for real purpose. Chivalric war—all war, perhaps—is manufactured purpose. Hamlet can talk about clutching it to his bosom but he cannot do it, for there is nothing inevitable about it.

Military honor is finally a role, much like Laertes' role as revenge hero. Both roles are satisfying, both integrate and direct the personality. But once you realize that you are playing the role for just these reasons, using it as a self-serving device, its attraction fades. As its inevitability diminishes, so does its reality. War and revenge both prove finally so rewarding because they provide, by all the killing, the irrefutable reality needed to bolster the role, restore its inevitability. Thus Shakespeare chose them, a revenge plot superposed on a Fortinbras-honor plot, for his play about motive. They provided a model for the kind of motive men find most satisfying; they combine maximum dramatic satisfaction with the irrefutable reality only bloody death can supply. In the Elizabethan absurdity as in our own, men kill others and themselves because that is the only real thing left to do. It is a rare paradox and Shakespeare builds his play upon it.

But even death is not dependable. We can learn to make sport of it, enjoy it. So the gravedigger puns on his craft. So, too, I suppose, Fortinbras laconically remarks at the end of the play: “Such a sight as this / Becomes the field, but here shows much amiss.” Death's reality can vanish too. All our purposes end up, like the skull Hamlet meditates on, a stage prop. It is not accidental that the language which closes the play is theatrical. Hamlet even in death does not escape the dramatic self. When the bodies are “high on a stage … placed to the view” Horatio will “speak to th' yet unknowing world,” will authenticate the proceeding with a rhetorical occasion. Hamlet's body, Fortinbras commands, is to be borne “like a soldier to the stage. / For he was likely, had he been put on, / To have proved most royal.”
Nor is it accidental that Hamlet kills Polonius. The act is his real attempt at revenge, Polonius his real enemy. Polonius embodies the dramatic self-consciousness which stands between Hamlet and the roles—Avenger and King—he was born to play. But Polonius pervades the whole of Hamlet's world and lurks within Hamlet himself. Only death can free Hamlet. Perhaps this is why he faces it with nonchalance. Much has been said about Hamlet's stoicism, but how unstoical the play really is! Honest feeling demands a dramatic equivalent to make it real just as artifice does. Stoicism demands a preexistent reality, a central self beyond drama, which the play denies. Stoicism is death and indeed, in Hamlet, the second follows hard upon the avowal of the first. We have no choice but to play.

And so Hamlet chooses his foil and plays. I have been arguing that the play invokes rhetorical coordinates as well as serious ones. It makes sense, if this is so, that it should end with a sublime game and the triumph of chance. Hamlet never solves his problem, nor does chance solve it for him, nor does the play solve it for us. No satisfactory model for motive, no movement from game to sublime, is suggested. Hamlet can finally kill the King because the King thoughtfully supplies a dramatic occasion appropriate to the deed. And Hamlet can kill Laertes because dramatic motive has destroyed naive purpose. And vice versa. But Hamlet cannot get rid of his dramatic self, his dramatic motives. The duel allegorizes the quarrel between kinds of motive which the play has just dramatized. And the duel, like the play, is a zero-sum game. Interest for both adds up to zero. The play leaves us, finally, where it leaves Hamlet. We have savoried the violence and the gorgeous poetry and been made aware that we do. We have been made to reflect on play as well as purpose. We have not been shown how to move from one to the other. Nor that it cannot be done. We are left, like those in the play, dependent on death and chance to show us how to put our two motives, our two selves, together.

Shakespeare as a mature playwright is not supposed to be an opaque stylist. The great unity of his mature tragedies is a style we look through, not at. The gamesman with words fades out with the nondramatic poems and early infatuations like Love's Labor's Lost. Hamlet shows, by itself, how wrong this view of Shakespeare's development is. The play depends upon an alternation of opaque and transparent styles for its meaning. The alternation almost is the meaning. Hamlet is a play about motive, about style, and thus perhaps, of the mature plays, an exception? I don't think so. Where Shakespeare is most sublime he is also most rhetorical and both poetics are likely to be present in force. To illustrate such a thesis would constitute an agreeable task. The lines it would follow are clear enough. They would yield explanation of the double plot more basic than the comic/serious one. They would render the comic/tragic division altogether less important than it now seems.

In play after play the same stylistic strategy illustrates the same juxtaposition of motive, of play and purpose. Richard cannot learn the difference. Hal must. Lear can play the king but he has never been a king. Antony and Cleopatra juxtaposes not only public and private life but two poetics and two selves. The double plot becomes, over and over, a serious plot-poetic and a play plot-poetic. The fatal innocence of Shakespeare's characters turns out, over and over, to be innocence about the real nature of their motivation. All through the Henriad political rhetoric can be seen as rhetoric. Egypt is meant to be seen as more wordy and more metaphorical than Rome. Romeo and Juliet depends on our seeing the Petrarchan rhetoric as such, else we will mistake the kind of play it is, a play where death authenticates game. Lear on the heath, that centerpiece of Shakespearean sublimity, alters his outlines considerably within rhetorical coordinates. Shakespearean tragedy may come to seem, as in Hamlet, a juxtaposition of the two motives with a hole in the middle, with no way to connect them. The comedies collapse them. And the problem plays and romances try to make a path between the two, see them in dynamic interchange. The two things that obsessed Shakespeare were style and motive, and his career can be charted coherently from beginning to end in terms of their interrelation. In this he typifies the stylistic strategy of the Renaissance as a whole. The real question of motive lay beyond good and evil. It was the principal task of the self-conscious rhetorical style to point this moral. Human flesh is sullied with self-consciousness, with theatricality, and these will be the ground for whatever authentic morality any of us can muster.

Note
Criticism: Language And Imagery: Imtiaz Habib (essay date 1994)


[In the following essay, Habib offers a close reading of Hamlet's love poem to Ophelia and argues that Hamlet deliberately intends his poetry to be misread. The critic further contends that misreading of all kinds is central to the action and meaning of Hamlet.]

Doubt thou the stars are fire,
Doubt that the sun doth move,
Doubt truth to be a liar,
But never doubt I love.
O dear Ophelia, I am ill at these numbers. I have not art to reckon my groans, but that I love thee best, O most best, believe it. Adieu.
Thine evermore, most dear lady, whilst this machine is to him, Hamlet.(1)

Hamlet's love poem to Ophelia, which Polonius reads out to Claudius and Gertrude in 2.2.116-24 of Hamlet, is an awkward, doubtful business. The love relationship between Hamlet and Ophelia is, admittedly, a minor strand in this complex tragedy. But readers trained in resolving the balanced antinomies of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century English love poetry often reach for a generalized meaning in Hamlet's poem too quickly to notice the conflicts of its particular oppositions. The conventional response to the poem would be to regard it as a hyperbolic assertion of Hamlet's love for Ophelia in the tradition of Elizabethan and Jacobean syllogistic love poetry (as in Donne's “Go and Catch a Falling Star”). “Doubt the most believable things,” Hamlet's poem seems to say, “but never doubt that I love you.” To construct this sense from a close reading of the poem, however, involves one in considerable difficulties.

The problem centers on the variable relationship between the sense of “doubt” and the statements that are made to be the subject of that doubt in each of the poem's first three lines, and on the consequent uncertainty of the sense of “doubt” and of Hamlet's “love” in the poem's last line. There is an inversion of the meaning of “doubt” either in the second line or in the third or in both, depending on our taste in paradox. If “doubt” in the last line means what it seems to mean in lines 2 and 3, i.e., suspect, fearfully surmise, tentatively believe (O.E.D. 1: 616-17),2 then the line amounts to a disavowal of love. Is Hamlet asking to be believed as a lover or disbelieved? Is the poem an avowal of love or a denial of it? No wonder that many modern European poets and writers in over a hundred attempts have had a hard time translating Hamlet's poem, as Alexander and Barbara Gerschenkron have shown.3

Among the critics who have noticed Hamlet's problematic poem and responded to it, Robert Bozanich in 1980 made the interesting suggestion that Hamlet's poem, with its semantic inversions, could be seen as a psychic mirror or “Rorschach blot” that is intended to mockingly reflect the assumptions of the poem's readers rather than those of its author. Thus, Claudius sees in Hamlet's lines ambition, Gertrude shame, Polonius frustrated sexuality, and Ophelia Hamlet's impending madness, which in turn reflects her own future madness (90-93). The Gentleman's comment in 4.5.7-13 that hearers interpret Ophelia's mad words to suit “their own thoughts” could apply to Hamlet's poem as well.

What is interesting about Bozanich's idea of seeing Hamlet's poem as a psychic mirror is that it seems to explain not just responses to the poem within the play but also those outside it, among its critical readers. Those comfortable in their assumptions about the poem's Petrarchan pedigree and about Hamlet's strained
courtship of Ophelia have insulated themselves from the lurking discomfiture of Hamlet's lines by simply glossing over them (Meader 149-50; Doran 37-38; King 52; Blanke 22). Others, wanting to contain the poem and its disturbances, have attempted to domesticate the problem by minimizing the ambiguity of the lines and giving such ambiguity an incidental miscellaneous value: the poem is unquestionably an avowal of love although there is enough room for ambiguity in the lines (Jenkins 462-63; Hibbard 209). Still others have tried to defuse the problem by either apologizing for Hamlet (Levin 54), or for us (Skulsky 485).

Extending what Geoffrey Hartman has pointed out about the play's opening lines—“Who's there?”—we can say that Hamlet's cryptic poem seems to challenge all those who read it to declare themselves, i.e., to be read themselves (3-19; qtd. in Patterson 49). In its interrogative designs and subversive disturbances, the poem seems to lend itself naturally to phenomenological and deconstructive analyses, neither inappropriate perhaps for a play as concerned as Hamlet is with the reflexions of textuality and the dysfunctions of meaning. To grapple with the significance of Hamlet's cryptic love poem is to go beyond an exploration of any local Shakespearean improprieties and be caught in a network of subversive relations between Hamlet and the world. Hamlet's four-line poem is the text for a pervasive system of misreading that dominates the play, or, as Stephen Booth put it in an important discussion of the poem, it is “a model for the experience of the play as a whole” (173).

The text, in Wolfgang Iser's terms, is “a structured prefigurement … that has to be received, and the way in which it is received depends as much on the reader as on the text” (107). Furthermore, “the work interrogates and transforms the implicit beliefs we bring to it, disconfirms our routine habits of perception,” and rather than merely reinforcing our given perceptions, it “violates or transgresses these normative ways of seeing.” Thus, “The whole point of reading … is that it brings us into a deeper self-consciousness, catalyzes a more critical view of our own identities.” Transferred to the realm of interpersonal behavior, these functions of reading acquire strategic implications. To the extent that we can read others we can control others and vice-versa. We would, obviously, like to read others without ourselves being read. As Carol Cook has put it in the related context of her reading of gender differences in Much Ado About Nothing, “To read others is an act of aggression; to be read is to be emasculated. Masculine privilege is contingent on the legibility of women.” Reading as a subversive strategy of manipulation shades off into misreading: we would like to read others and want them to misread us. We would like to transmit false readings and receive none, and thus misreading shades off into misleading: we would like to mislead others but not ourselves be misled. In Cook's terms, “Beatrice alternately challenges others' misreadings of her humorist's masks and encourages them to take her as she appears” (186-91). Hamlet's poem is difficult to read because Hamlet, like Beatrice, does not wish to be understood satisfactorily, wishes to be misread.

Love, of course, is the primary location of the secret self and its primary point of vulnerability, and therefore of critical importance in the struggle for self-possession that defines human experience. It is going to be the first subject of concealment, for Hamlet as well as for Ophelia, Gertrude, and Claudius (as evidenced for the latter, for instance, in the densely equivocal announcement of his marriage to Gertrude in the third scene of the play). Patricia Fumerton has suggested that in Elizabethan cultural taste the little, privately circulated love poem with its curious mix of artifice and sentiment—like both the aristocratic Elizabethan country house with its stately rooms that also connect to private ones, and the miniature portrait that is at once displayed and hidden—is a representation of an impulse of self-revelation that is also implicitly an instinct of self-concealment, an invitation to a reading of the self that only yields a misreading of it (104-11). Paralleling Hamlet's love poem is Queen Elizabeth's own love poem, “On Monsieur's Departure”:

I grieve and dare not show my discontent
I love and yet am forced to seem to hate
I do and dare not say I ever meant,
I seem stark mute but inwardly do prate.
I am and not, I freeze and yet am burned,
Since from myself another self I turned. ...
Hamlet's self-rescinding love poem is, then, at once a literary analog to a cultural attitude and a semantic code for the dramatized community in which it appears. It is a key to the historical world of Elizabeth as well as to the dramatic world of Elsinore. It is also an index to the (mis)representations of Hamlet's self in speech and behavior in the play.

The text of misreading that Hamlet's poem contains, it is worth noting, is of a particularly impenetrable quality. The poem's meaning is lost in the aporia between an assertion and its implicit opposite, which threatens to cancel it. The declaration that he loves Ophelia is infected by the possibility that he does not love her, the affirmation of the one merely passing into a validation of the other and an impersonation of it, and vice-versa. The deconstructive reflexivity of the unstable signifier “doubt” that creates this aporia is a perfect barrier against the intrusion of legibility into the poem. In a world of hidden intentionality the poem is a declaration of love that reverses and thereby conceals itself—a sign that announces itself by its disappearance. The self-canceling design of Hamlet's poem is replicated by the evasive movement of the last line of the letter that encloses it—“But that I love thee best, O most best, believe it”—a compulsive rhetorical gesture that directs attention away from the fact of his love to an assumption of it, and in doing so obscuring the fact and implicitly erasing it (Bozanich 91). The self-negation of Hamlet's statement happens on the verbal and cognitive level, on the level of speech and understanding. Hamlet is unmaking the word and with it, as we shall see later, the world. Irrespective of their precise circumstance (whether they were written before or after Polonius's injunction to Ophelia to rebuff Hamlet), the poem and the letter neither seek nor find any readership with Ophelia or with anyone else because, like the other human gestures in the play, love has become one more cipher in a text that refuses to, because it cannot, be deciphered. In being unable to exist except through and in its own annulment, Hamlet's declaration of love affirms subversion as the chief ideology of Elsinore and misreading as its principal text, and announces his mastery over both.

Predictably, the esoteric method of Hamlet's poem is not unlike the dubious style of the other letters that he writes in the play. On the way to England he re-writes Claudius's order for his execution in such a way that the meaning of the order is clear but not its manner: the justification he offers for the order is deliberately obscure and sarcastic (“As peace should still her wheaten garland wear / And stand a comma 'tween their amities, / And many such like as's of great charge” [5.2.41-43]). As Jonathan Goldberg has put it, “Hamlet's skilled hand insures the force of the document, but it does not reveal the writer” (323). Likewise, in the strange letter he sends Claudius announcing his return to England, it is unclear whether his message is contrition or defiance: the letter's reference to seeking “pardon” (4.7.46) is mocked by its stilted, artificial language of royalty. In both of these writings, as in his poem to Ophelia, content is distorted by the variability of intention. Hamlet's own remark to Horatio that, even though he used royal handwriting to re-write the execution order, he normally holds it “A baseness to write fair” (5.2.34), aptly describes his penchant not just for illegibility in handwriting but also for incommunicability in substance. The puzzling love poem, in other words, sets the pattern for Hamlet's enigmatic compositions elsewhere in the action.

The origin of this ideology of subversion and its text of misreading cannot be wholly situated, by Hamlet or by us, in a specific causal event—the murder of a King by his brother. For, even as the Ghost's radical tale of treachery rewrites, revises, and blocks other readings of Elsinore, it is itself a misreading. Its opaque ghostly authority, its manipulative implication of Hamlet in filial duty and an agenda of revenge, and the impenetrability of its ambiguities about Gertrude (who wavers in the Ghost's account between being a reluctant lover, an adulteress, and a murderess [1.5.42-57]) are all dubieties that undermine the validity of its text. The very strength of the Ghost's reading of Elsinore makes it a misreading since excessive magnification will always blur the total picture. As Harold Bloom has put it, a strong “r[reading] is always a misreading” (3). Hamlet's difficulties with the Ghost's account are implicit here in the lament with which he ends the scene, “The time is out of joint—O cursed spite! / That ever I was born to set it right!” (1.5.88-89), and later in his momentary revaluation of the Ghost's words in his decision to put on the play-within-the play (2.2.594-605).
That is, all readings are tainted with the suspicion of misreading, become misreadings. True readings remain inaccessible, uncertain and unknown. One of Roland Barthes’ comments is pertinent here:

To read, in fact, is a labor of language. To read is to find meanings and to find meanings is to name them; but these named meanings are swept towards other names; names call to each other, reassemble, and their grouping calls for further naming: I name, I unname, I rename; so the text passes; it is a nomination in the course of becoming, a tireless approximation, a metonymic labor.

To this we may perhaps add the observation that causality is the last human illusion. To be able to ascribe reasons to phenomena is to be able to know them, and if knowledge is power a belief in the causality of phenomena is implicitly a desire for one's ability to control phenomena. These are goals as human as they are philosophically elusive. In the endless chain of cause and effect we may discern local connections and even learn to contribute to them, but to uncover the first cause—the original reason why the world is the way it is—that is surely beyond human fathoming. This is to say that in the short range the world is decipherable but in the long range, in terms of origins, it is unknowable. Thus, the misreadings of Elsinore are both intentional and inexplicable: as Hamlet cannot read the world so he will not let the world read him.

To Hamlet, the death of his father, by natural or unnatural causes, is the inexplicable cue for the extinction of a rational civilization. It is the occasion for the rise of a King whose namelessness in the play (Claudius is the only Shakespearean King never addressed either by his official title [Calderwood xv] or by his name [Goldberg 326]), matches the equivocal blankness of his speech (as for instance, in 1.3). That death is the setting for the rise of a world in which a celestially angelic Gertrude, a “Niobe” in her “tears,” can be with the “satyr,” Claudius, as readily as she was with the “Hyperion” that was her husband (1.2.140-49). This is a world in which, from behind the pomp and glitter of a coronation ceremony, the riddle of incest decouples things from their names, thoughts from their expression, and ideas from their representation.

But this event—the death of his father—cannot be given any status save that of a desultory event. It cannot be afforded any attribute of causality because causality has the legibility of logic that is denied by the world that Hamlet confronts. The subversion and misreadings of Elsinore are, in other words, causeless, a random phenomenon in the dynamics of chaos. For reasons unknown, Elsinore and the world have become unreadable to Hamlet, and with that Hamlet has become unreadable to others and to himself. In this sense, the text of misreading that Hamlet affirms in his poem is his horrible practical joke, his real gruesome revenge upon the world for the incomprehensibility of its text. This, we note, is a revenge that Hamlet’s audience would relish, for, as Stephen Orgel has recently pointed out, “the Renaissance often found in incomprehensibility a positive virtue” (436). Indeed, in his poem Hamlet exemplifies Montaigne’s words from “On the Inconsistency of Our Actions”: “I have nothing to say about myself absolutely, simply and solidly, without confusion and without mixture, or in one word” (242).

That misreading is the principal Elsinorean activity, and a phenomenon that precedes the Ghost's disturbing revelations, is in fact evident from the play's very beginning. The characters of Elsinore are all trying to impose their reading of events and phenomena on others while blocking those of others (Payne 100-11).

Hartman has suggested (in the reference given above), that the whole plot of the opening scene with its play of murky happenings and confused identities enacts the phenomenology of readings that challenge the reader. The principal element in that phenomenology is the riddling apparition that resists the semantic probeings of the skeptic philosopher, Horatio. The nocturnal visitor affords neither him, nor Barnardo, Francisco, or Marcellus, any more sense than the vague discomfort that “it bodes some strange eruption” to the state (1.1.69), or, as Marcellus articulates it later, that “Something is rotten in the state of Denmark” (1.4.89). The blocked reading merely renews the desire to read, with the hope that the “dumbness” of illegibility may give way to the legibility of “speech” with a changed reader—“young Hamlet” (1.1.170-71).

But the request for a
reading privileges a legibility in that reader himself that cannot pass unchallenged by him. The aim of Hamlet's canny cross-examination of Horatio and the guards is to flush out any hidden agendas they may have in inviting him to read the specter as his father:

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Ham: Arm'd say you?
Hor: Arm'd, my lord.
Ham: From top to toe?
Hor: My lord, from head to foot.
Ham: Then saw you not his face? ...
Ham: His beard was gris'd, no?
Hor: It was, as I have seen it in his life, a sable silver'd.
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(1.2.226-40)

Of course, Hamlet's attempt to read Horatio and the guards' failure to read the spectral phenomenon have both been preceded by Claudius's and Gertrude's attempt to read him earlier in the same scene. There, Claudius's Kingly reading tries to situate him as "a cousin" and "son" and thereby demands, by executive and filial privilege, to know the source of "the clouds" of melancholic despair that plague him. Hamlet counters this with a defensive misreading of himself as someone who is neither "kin" nor "kind," and who is not at all under the weather but in fact "too much in the sun," the punning between "son" and "sun" obscuring both the content and the intent of his reply. The attempted precision of Claudius's reading of Hamlet is neatly dissipated by the brazen ambiguity of Hamlet's misreading of himself, with the particular diagnosis of behavior of the one being silently replaced by that of the other. In this tense verbal thrust and parry, readability, i.e., knowability, is established as the besieged site of a fierce Elsinorean tactical struggle for dominance.

Unsurprisingly, as is the state so is the family. The most developed family depicted in the play, Polonius's, merely replicates within itself the pattern of interaction within the court. The cute scenario in the third scene of the play, of a cocky elder brother and an officious father fussing over the danger of a young commoner girl's liaison with royalty, is also an attempt to govern a young girl's mind. Laertes' prognosis of "the chariest maid[s]' … prodigality] … If she unmask her beauty to the moon"—otherwise "the shot and danger of desire" (1.3.35-38)—is a notion of Ophelia's sexuality that he is implicitly seeking to validate. Likewise, Polonius's inquisitorial suggestion, a few lines later, of a busy affair between her and Hamlet is a reading of her behavior that Polonius intends to confirm: "What is between you? Give me up the truth" (1.3.98). The teasing maidenly reticence with which Ophelia instinctively sidesteps such testing preserves her sovereignty over her own decipherability and with that, her options of personal freedom. The same struggle to regulate behavior permeates the relationship between father and son, as for instance when Polonius facetiously advises Laertes about the necessity of behaving duplicitously with the world while remaining true ("above all") to himself (1.3.58-80). Later, he instructs Reynaldo to spy on his son by using "indirections [to] find directions out" (2.1.38-63). Both speeches exemplify a technique of understanding others while withholding understanding from them—a technique, in short, of reading others while remaining unread or misread oneself. It is in this context of the pervasive misreadings of Elsinore that Hamlet's quizzical love poem is inscribed.

Given the dense inexplicability of Elsinore, Hamlet's feelings for Ophelia can only be the occasion for his riddling equivocation and paradoxical behavior, with her and with others. His visit to her in her closet, which Ophelia describes in 2.1.73-97 is an act that is simultaneously an affirmation and a denial. He goes to her but does not speak to her. He goes to her in an instinctive gesture of communication but ends up in a silent scrutiny of her face. He stares at her, reads her, without letting her read him, or, making sure that she misreads him and encouraging her misreading of him (as transmitted through Polonius) as mad. The uncertainty of what he reads in her is matched and cloaked by the uncertainty of what Ophelia and Polonius, and we with them, can read in him. Each reading—that he is mad, that he is love-sick, that he is testing her through an "antic disposition"—is instantly challenged by the others and thus ends up as no more than a misreading of
him.

Again, he flaunts this same riddling behavior before her in the “nunnery” scene in Act 3. He did and did not love Ophelia, he says (3.1.114-18)—playing again on the compulsive verb “believe,” but this time in a direction opposite that of the letter. If she “believed” he loved her, he asserts bluntly that he loved her not—imposing his belief on hers and blocking it. The instability of the signifier “nunn'ry” with which he ends his tirade (3.1.129)—poised as it is between its formal sober connotation as a retreat of sanctity and its bawdy popular Elizabethan denotation as a brothel (O.E.D. 1: 264; Jenkins 282)—masks perfectly the sense of his feelings for her, now or in the past. His insistence later, in the grim verbal and physical scuffle with Laertes in Ophelia's grave, that he “lov'd Ophelia” (5.1.269), declares his rights over the politics of intentionality. If Laertes' love for his sister allows him to rant against Hamlet for causing her death, then Hamlet's love for Ophelia allows him to vent his fury at Laertes for blackening his name. Hamlet will not let his feelings for Ophelia become Elsinore's vehicle of legibility into him, a foreground of its mastery over him. What he will give up, to Ophelia, Polonius, Laertes, Gertrude, Claudius, and to us, is only the misreading of incoherence. The more anyone tries to read Hamlet the more he will be misread.

The desire to be misread is the desire to be mysterious, and to be mysterious to the world is to confuse it. Hamlet traps Rosencrantz and Guildenstern when they come to him in 2.2 as robotic extensions of Claudius's probing of his mind, to demonstrate his ability to deflect Elsinore's attempt to plumb him back upon itself. Somewhat Iago-like, Hamlet offers Rosencrantz and Guildenstern not a paucity of motives for his melancholic behavior but a plethora of them—thwarted ambition, love sickness, depression. In this bag of motives the dilemma of choice transforms visibility into inscrutability and sense to confusion, as Guildenstern later reports to Claudius:

Nor do we find him forward to be sounded
But with a crafty madness keeps aloof
When we would bring him on to some confession
Of his true state.

(3.1.7-9)

To preserve the sovereignty of the self, it must not be allowed to have a text because a text invites reading. The “angelic action” and “God[-like] apprehension,” and the “quintessen[ial]” dust of man, in Hamlet's speech to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern on the nature of man (2.2.303-10), are free signifiers in Hamlet's unmaking of the text of the self of man. Hamlet's unmaking of the text of the self has affinities with what Michael F. McCanles has described as Shakespeare's deconstructive character analysis,

the notion of … textuality put forth by Jacques Derrida and Julia Kristeva: a text without a centered self or substantive origins, a fluid melting of multiple texts thrown up momentarily, coalescing, then disappearing, to be replaced by still other texts.

(201)

The unmade text of the self is what Hamlet describes, both to Guildenstern at the end of the play scene when he forces him to play the recorder, and immediately after to Polonius when he forces him to decipher the shape of a cloud that looks like a weasel and like a whale. The chaotic self of man in Hamlet's unmaking of it, cannot be “play[ed]” and “sound[ed],” and the “heart” of its “mystery” cannot be “pluck[ed] out” (3.2.364-71). And the text of the self of man must be unmade if the world is to be unmade. If sense—the logical connected arrangement of units of meaning, i. e., a readable text, or what Terence Hawkes in a related context has described as “the unity, progression, coherence” that are “part of the [world’s] ruthless and rigorous process of domestication [and control]” (324)—if this is what holds the world together, then
confusion is what will unmake it. If the world has already become an unreadable text, then, Hamlet's text of misreading will accelerate that unreadability. Behind the text of misreading that Hamlet affirms lies a grim malevolence towards a malevolent world.

In trying to destroy the text of the self and of the world, Hamlet's text of misreading is also intended to disallow the very idea of a text itself. The textlessness of his soliloquies matches the textlessness of the play he puts on to rewrite both the play he has inherited from the Ghost and the play he himself is set in. His soliloquies seem to show transparently the processes of thought and decision-making but actually give us only their opaque results. For instance, in the “Rogue and peasant slave” soliloquy (2.2.550-605) and in the “To be or not to be” one (3.1.55-88), the tortuous self-analyses that Hamlet conducts have little connection to the conclusions he quickly reaches for—deciding to put on a play in the former and choosing inaction in the latter.11 This is identical to the way that the signifiers of an anti-text have ineffectual links with the signifieds they couple with, the result in both cases being a refusal to communicate with a reader.

So too, “The Murder of Gonzago” rewrites the text of the Hamlet play and the Ghost's in a manner that pretends to speak with the audience, but in fact, in its deliberate conflation of the roles of brother and nephew, killer and revenger, in the figure of Lucianus, and in its incompleteness (it stops midway and we do not know how much of it, if any, was left to be performed), declines to do so. If Claudius's angry exit is provoked by his uncertainty and suspicion of the staged play's intentions, this fuels our uncertainty about precisely what Claudius finds suspicious (the spectacle of regicide, the murder of a brother, the manner of the killing, or the murderer's quick wooing of the victim's widow), and about what he understands of the staged play (does he see the dumb show, and, if he does, why does he ask what its “argument” is?). Both uncertainties, Claudius's and ours, combine to make the entire episode resist the cohering control of textuality. In denying textuality Hamlet is not so much destroying a textuality that the world still has as he is participating in, and deliberately contributing to, its rampant anti-textuality.

In making the staged play episode resist a textuality, its author is himself resisting the textual authority of the larger play of which he is a part. Just as the staged play refuses to make full sense Hamlet himself refuses to make full sense, his exuberance at the performance's end being but a deceptive signifier of his authorial conclusions about the success of his staged text. (If Claudius has seen the dumb show and failed to respond to it, then the Ghost's words cannot be taken “for a thousand pound” [3.2.286]).12 Hamlet's deliberate collapsing of selfhood and textuality begins the disintegration of Elsinore and the Hamlet play, both of which become sites of defiance of form and meaning.

To be unable to read is to die, misreading is dying. The disappearance of a text of self and of textuality itself can only be a prelude to the world's slide into the random incoherence of death. With no textuality to hold them, lives crumple, characters fall and are expunged. Polonius's “sudden, rash, intruding” death at the hands of Hamlet, the first of the play's many deaths, is without explanation or apologie because it belongs to no script. Unsupported by any role in family or state because of his inability to read and domesticate either his wayward daughter, her dangerous lover, or the “transformed” Prince, Polonius falls—a miscellaneous end to a life suddenly become miscellaneous. Cast adrift by the illegibility of her lover and the dubiety of her father, Ophelia's slide into madness perfectly replicates her textual redundancy. Her disjointed songs in 4.5, with their conflation of the texts of sexual betrayal and elegiac lament for the loss of a loved one in death, are as contextless as her own death, in Gertrude's evocative description (4.7.166-83), by a drowning closely observed but not prevented.

As royal order breaks in Elsinore, first signalled by Claudius's disruptive exit from the dramatic performance, the King's assassins are themselves assassinated. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern die quietly off-stage as the game of cheap espionage in which Claudius had cast them is terminated, literally in Hamlet's re-writing of his assassination orders on board ship to England. Baffled by the wild behavior and hallucinatory antics of her son in her bed chamber and caught by his “wild, whirling words,” some of which strike home in the direction
of her wedded Queenly bliss, Gertrude's notions of maternality, wifedom, and Queenliness are at once confused. She floats in a tide of seeping self-sickness, dreading to face the mad Ophelia and seeing her death in the accents in which perhaps she would like to see her own (in the passage cited above). Her intervention on Hamlet's side in his graveyard scuffle with Laertes prefigures her fatal, albeit unwitting, intervention in Claudius's design of the poisoned wine cup intended for her son and she dies a blundering death marginally lamented by husband and son. Displaced by Ophelia's death from the scenario of strutting protective brotherhood, and impelled by his father's murder into a desperate revenge plot, Laertes falls in the play's last scene, caught in the cross-pull of Hamlet's sincere sportsmanship and Claudius's manipulative stratagem of hidden retribution, unable to read fully or relate to either.

As Elsinore's texts disintegrate and characters collapse, its center, and its chief reader and author, Claudius, begins to deconstruct, losing his authority over both language and action. Within the arranged self of majesty in Claudius the memory of criminal instinct stubbornly intrudes, stirred by Polonius's chance remark about the perfidy of necessary deceptions when they are rehearsing Ophelia's entrapment of Hamlet before the "nunnery" scene:

O 'tis too true!
How smart a lash that speech doth give my conscience!
The harlot's cheek, beautied with plast'ring art
Is not more ugly to the thing that helps it
Than is my deed to my most painted word.

(3.1.48-52)

Reinforced by the experience of Hamlet's subversive play, such insistent memories erode self-authority in Claudius, dividing thought from action, speech from intent, and driving them up against each other, so that as he prays his "words fly up" but his "thoughts remain below" (3.3.97-98). The loss of self-authority releases hardened and hidden desires in Claudius—for the "crown," the "ambition," the "Queen"—that he cannot forsake (3.3.55), and for the violence by which he acquired them. Claudius's Kingship begins to die in the "pestilent" public speeches of an uncontrollable Laertes demanding redress for a father's murder that "Like ... a murd'ring piece" gives Claudius "superfluous death" (4.5.91-96), and this death signals the release of the cold-blooded killer in him. In fact, by this time the practiced killer in Claudius has already emerged, in his compulsion for the purging of the "hectic in [his] blood" by the killing of Hamlet (4.3.65-68).

The loss of authority in the Kingly self can only reflect the loss of authority in the state, the textual subversion of the one merely compounding that of the other. As the secret assassination of Hamlet goes awry and the assassins are themselves assassinated, so the killing of Hamlet in the duel fails to hold true and instead also kills the killers. The physical death of Claudius in the play's last scene recalls the textual death of King Claudius earlier in the scene of Laertes' riotous entry into the castle and replicates in its savagery the ferocity of the killer Claudius's own compulsive violence.

Claudius's death is both textual and textless. It is textual in that it completes the object of the revenge text—the retributive killing of the killer. It is textless in the sense that the manner in which it is accomplished destroys that textuality. Hamlet kills Claudius in a frenzy of spontaneous action that has little to do with premeditated vengeance, particularly of the sort stipulated by the Ghost's text. If it is vengeful at all, that vengeance is an immediate response to the local plan of Claudius to poison him, and has little to do with his father's murder. Claudius falls in a welter of confused violence that the court can only misread as "Treason!" (5.2.323). Somewhat as Hamlet's declaration of love in his riddling poem had announced itself by its own disappearance, the revenge text of Hamlet completes itself by its own erasure. The litter of bodies that fills the play's last scene is not just conventional. It is uniquely a function of this play's compulsion to consume itself.
For Hamlet the greatest problem in his dramatized life is the desirability and danger of communication in an indecipherable world. To have a text of living is to be read and destroyed. Yet not having a text is to die. One can live, then, only by subverting life. By extension one can speak only by not speaking. Through one's silences one can understand by not understanding. One can live—triumph over death—by having a text that cannot be read. One can meet the indecipherability of the world by destroying the world as one is destroyed by it. This compound apocalyptic ethic can only be grounded in a celebration of silence as the sole good in a meaningless “unknowing” universe where “readiness” is but “all” (5.2.222). Horatio doesn't fail Hamlet's dying request “to tell [his] story.” As Hamlet himself erases meaning from his instructions to Horatio about what his text should contain—by his dying gesture of deferral, “the rest is silence” (5.2.358)—so, Horatio's bare account of “unnatural acts,” “accidental judgments” and “purposes mistook / Fall'n on the inventors' head” (5.2.380-86), is the prologue to an unfulfilled text—one that the play's physical end elides from our view.13

Thus Hamlet's play, like his poem, is built on a system of misreading that subverts meaning in the very process of its communication, that conceals as it reveals, and that exists only in its self-cancellation. As the poem subverts its own Petrarchan tradition by asserting love through the process of denying it, the play hides its literary lineage by accomplishing revenge through the process of destroying its textual framework (Waller 27; Hawkes 330). Just as Hamlet's struggle in his poem to find an original voice against the burden of a literary tradition leads him to his discovery of silence as a form of speech, Shakespeare's struggle to achieve a unique play amidst the pressure of a burgeoning copycat literary culture produces a text that de-textualizes itself to preserve its own integrity.14 Just as the origins of Hamlet's love letter are mysterious and hidden (exactly when was it written, is it authentic or a forgery? [Goddard 40; Ferguson 308 n. 21]), so the dramatic origins and models of Shakespeare's play are uncertain and unknown (who wrote the *Ur-Hamlet* and when?). As the subject of Hamlet's letter and poem—his love for Ophelia—is lost in its own doubts, the subject of Hamlet's play—the tragedy of his life—is buried in its own deletions, trapped in our endless misreadings of it. If *Hamlet* is a deconstructive play (Patterson 47; Calderwood xv), the enigmatic love letter to Ophelia, tucked away in one small corner of the play, contains much of the energies of such a modality and helps in executing it.

Notes

1. All citations from Shakespeare use the Riverside edition unless otherwise noted.
2. Examples of this usage from the *O.E.D.* include: “I havying doute of harmes of my body … dyd assemble these persones,” 1411, *Rolls of Parliament*, III, 650/2, and “The pinne or web is likewise to be doubted to happen in that year,” 1574, *Hyll, Conject. Weather*, ii. Also see Shakespeare's own use of this word earlier in the same scene, in Gertrude's words in line 56, as Stephen Booth has pointed out (174). For instances of this use of the word elsewhere in Shakespeare see *King Lear* 5.1.6 and *Timon of Athens* 1.2.155. Jonson in *Volpone* 3.7 has Bonario say of Mosca: “I do doubt / this fellow.”
3. The article is cited by the editors of Harold C. Goddard's posthumously published book *Alphabet of the Imagination* (57 n. 9).
4. Also see John J. Murray’s “mathematical” resolution of the problem. For examples of nineteenth-century dismissals of Hamlet's letter see Furness 2: 209.
5. That the poem “reads” its readers is also the substance of Goddard's trenchant comment (43). Goddard also argues that the poem is a partial forgery by Polonius (48-52; qtd. in Taylor 51 n. 9).
6. Booth's analysis, which is dependent on the concept of complementarity popularized by Norman Rabkin in his book *Shakespeare and the Common Understanding*, has affinities with the phenomenological and deconstructive argument I am using. My essay explores some of the implications of Booth's discussion. In a general sense, I have also profited from the critical methods and ideas of James Calderwood in *To Be and Not To Be*.
7. Paraphrased by Eagleton in his summary of Iser's theories (79).
8. On the use of negation in *Hamlet* see Calderwood's incisive discussion: “If poetic negation is positive then Not this exists on an equal footing with This. The absent is present, the denied affirmed, the forbidden consummated in the verbal act of negation itself” (61). On the breakdown of language generally in Shakespeare's tragedies, see also Danson, and Hawkes (*Shakespeare's Talking Animals*).

9. On the connection between incest and riddles see Levi-Strauss (34-39; qtd. in McAlinden 59 and Calderwood 205 n. 14).

10. On the greater importance of speech than of sight for producing meaning in phenomena, particularly here in the scenes of the Ghost's appearance before the guards and before Hamlet, see Don Parry Norford's essay. Norford says “Only when [the Ghost] speaks to Hamlet does the meaning of its appearance become known” (567).

11. That the conclusions of the soliloquies *seem* to arise from the context of the soliloquies but actually do not, may be less readily evident in the latter of these two soliloquies than in the first. That inaction is going to be Hamlet's choice in the “To be or not to be” soliloquy is indicated from the very beginning by the way it is associated with, and thereby valorized by, “being,” despite conventional expectations that “being” will mean living well and acting heroically, i. e., being active. Partly perhaps to hide this inversion in values, Hamlet, after setting out “being” and “non-being” in the first four lines as items in a particular series, switches their order and proceeds to discuss the *latter* item—non-being—first. He returns to “being” only afterwards, as a preferable alternative (3.1.59-68). In other words, what appears to be a debate really isn't one—Hamlet has already made up his mind about inaction before the speech begins and in the soliloquy he is only looking for ways to justify that decision. This is like his having suddenly decided, in the earlier soliloquy, to put on a play and then merely looking for reasons to do so (2.2.598-605). Harold Jenkins provides a good discussion of the hidden inversions in Hamlet's “To be or not to be” soliloquy in his edition of the play (484-91).

12. For an effective discussion of the dubieties of what the play-within-the-play “proves” about Claudius, see Brent Cohen (235-37). Stanley Cavell has offered a sophisticated Freudian rejection of what Hamlet's play actually proves about Claudius's guilt (179-91).

13. Calderwood, of course, says that this is a moment of termination as well as a beginning. Horatio's story is the text for the play's next performance before another audience (182-84).

14. I am referring, of course, to the busy, competitive production of sonnets, history plays, and romances, as well as revenge plays, in England in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. In Stanley Cavell's words, in *Hamlet* Shakespeare “is writing the revenge play to end revenge plays” (181).

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**Criticism: Language And Imagery: David Farley-Hills (essay date 1999)**


[In the following essay, Farley-Hills defends George Miles's linguistic argument (from 1870) that Hamlet planned his meeting with the pirates before he left for England. His defense involves some comparison of the Q2 and F versions of the play.]
The view that Hamlet had been planning, before he leaves Denmark, to be rescued by pirates on the journey to England has received short shrift from most Shakespeare commentators and editors since it was first given lengthy and forceful promulgation by the American scholar and author George Miles in his monograph of 1870, *A Review of Hamlet*. Miles made his suggestion provisional on the possibility of a pun on the word ‘craft’ at Q2 III. iv. 199: ‘If the word *crafts* had its present maritime significance in Shakespeare’s time, the pun alone is conclusive of a pre-arranged capture.’¹

W.W. Lawrence regarded the whole of Miles’s argument as ‘an absurd idea’,² and most of those few critics who have noticed Miles at all have substantially concurred. Later attempts to support Miles’s view, such as Martin Stevens’s article in *Shakespeare Quarterly*,³ have fared no better. The main objection, however, has often been that the use of ‘craft’ to mean ‘ship’ was unknown in Shakespeare’s day or too rare to be a meaningful reference. The German scholar Robert Petsch, for instance, in his article refuting Miles’s argument, argues that even if the word could have meant ‘ship’ in Elizabethan English, the usage would have been too rare and technical for a general audience to understand.⁴ Modern editors have been more forthright: G.R. Hibbard’s note on Q2 III. iv. 190, for instance, comments (with rather strange logic): ‘The earliest instance of *craft*, signifying “boat”, cited by the *OED* belongs to 1671-2, so there is little likelihood that Hamlet is quibbling.’⁵ In providing evidence that Hibbard and those many commentators and annotators who share a similar view are mistaken in this assumption, I think it worth again raising the ghost of Hamlet’s planned meeting with the pirates.

In the ‘closet’ scene of the Q2 version of *Hamlet* Shakespeare gives Hamlet nine lines in his last speech that do not occur in either Q1 or the Folio version. The last of these lines may or may not contain a pun on the word ‘crafts’:

When in one line two crafts directly meet.

(III. iv. 198-9)⁶

‘Crafts’ here certainly means (as most annotators agree) something like ‘cunning plots’ (Harold Jenkins). G.R. Hibbard rather ingeniously suggests in explanation of the last line: ‘when two exponents of the same skill or cunning device—in this case mining and counter-mining—meet one another head-on’. A problem with this, however, is that Hamlet promises to dig ‘one yard below their mines’. Jenkins too thinks that it is unlikely that the word also means ‘ships’ here: ‘A pun on *crafts*, ships, is (at this date) unlikely’,⁷ and elsewhere, in notes to III. iv. 207-11 and IV. vi. 19, finds ‘no justification’ for inferring that the pirates were in league with Hamlet in a plot to get him back to Denmark. At first sight the *OED* seems to give support to this scepticism; but as well as giving the date of the first known use of ‘craft’ meaning ‘ship’ as 1671 the compilers also add to the entry the note: ‘These uses were probably colloquial with watermen, fishers and seamen some time before they appeared in print, so that the history is not evidenced.’ Some support is given to the suggestion that this usage of the word is to be found earlier by the entry in Coles’s *English Dictionary* (1676), where one definition of ‘craft’ is ‘small vessels as ketches etc.’, which may imply it was a well-established usage by this date. But the *OED* compilers need not have resorted to conjecture. Kurath and Kuhn give two relevant entries in their *Medieval English Dictionary* where ‘Craft 9a’ is partly defined as ‘something built or made ... a building, ornament, painting, ship etc.’, and for their example of the meaning ‘ship’ they quote Beryn c.1460:

Wel was hym þat coude bynd or ondo
Any rope with-in shippe, þat longit to þe crafft.

Under ‘ship-craft (c)’ (meaning ‘ship’), they give as an example Scrope 1450: ‘The King sent ... to get þe þingis that myght abide with thayme that their ship-craffe brake not in the see.’ An example can be cited from the late fourteenth century in *Richard the Redeless*, iv. 74-7, where we read:
Than lay the lordis a-lee, with laste and with charge,
And bare aboute the barge, and blamed the maister,
That knewe not the kynde cours, that to the crafte longid,
And warned him wisely, of the wedir-side.(8)

We can even go further back than this, for the Bosworth and Toller Anglo-Saxon Dictionary enters under ‘Cræft IV’ ‘a craft, any kind of ship’. In view of these examples it can be regarded as certain that the usage was current in Shakespeare's day; indeed Shakespeare himself may be using it elsewhere in a pun in Troilus and Cressida (IV. v. 103-4) where Troilus runs riot with piscatorial metaphors:

Whilst others fish with craft for great opinion,
I with great truth catch mere simplicity.(9)

Jenkins's objection clearly has no force against the weight of this evidence. Trusting to etymological evidence, then, to refute Miles's argument turns out to be relying on ‘false fire’.

A more fundamental objection, however, becomes clear in Jenkins's comment on Hamlet's earlier lines (III. iv. 207-11), ‘Let it work … at the moon’: ‘Hamlet's confidence in the outcome will prepare the audience for it, but affords no justification for supposing that he has any precise plan for bringing it about (which he ultimately does by sudden inspiration, V. ii. 6-53), still less that he “has planned in advance for the intervention of the pirates” (SQ, xxvi, 279)’. Jenkins rejects the possibility of a pun on ‘crafts’ because he refuses to contemplate the reading of these lines it would imply.

The possibility of a pun on ‘crafts’ does not, of course, prove that Shakespeare intended one, but it does open up the possibility of a different understanding of Hamlet's reaction to being sent to England. The phrase ‘two crafts directly meet’ suggests accommodation to a pun because literally it would be against Hamlet's interest for the plots or stratagems to meet directly, and his aim is obviously to keep his plans secret. It would be very much in character for Hamlet to express through a pun what he does not wish to reveal openly (as he shows in the first words he speaks in the play). It is true that the reference to ‘crafts’ in the ‘closet’ scene would be puzzling to an audience, because it is the first we hear of Hamlet's intention of initiating the counterplot (though the meaning ‘ships’ is the first, not the second, meaning that springs to mind to a modern audience, and this might well have been the case with a popular audience in Shakespeare's time if the OED is right that the meaning, far from being 'technical’, was a popular one). In any case Hamlet constantly likes to keep friend, foe, and even audience guessing at his precise intentions. Shakespeare is constantly engaged in mystification in Hamlet (as befits a play which questions the adequacy of ‘your philosophy’), especially in the later versions, as, for instance, when he substitutes in Q2 and F a far more ambiguous response of the Queen to Hamlet's revelation that he knows of his father's murder, compared to her unambiguous response in Q1: ‘I never knew of this most horride murder’. The difference between Q2 and F in their account of the meeting with the pirates might well be explained by a later decision in F to make the nature of the encounter more ambiguous. We can also accept Jenkins's explanation that the purpose of the Q2 passage in III. iv. 207-12 is to ‘prepare the audience’ for what is to come.

Miles points out that Hamlet is surprisingly acquiescent when Claudius tells him he must board the boat for England (IV. iii. 44). He simply repeats Claudius's command ‘For England’ (F turns it into a question) and then says ‘Good’, followed by the somewhat mysterious remark: ‘I see a cherub that sees them’ (referring to Claudius's ‘purposes’). Jenkins finds in this ‘a hint that Hamlet perceives more than the King supposes’, but it is the cherub that sees Claudius's intention; Hamlet merely sees the cherub. He only finds out Claudius's true intentions when he opens the letter addressed to the King of England on board ship. Hamlet may be intimating that he sees a glimmer of providential help in the journey to England and that it might provide him with an opportunity if properly understood and prepared for, or it might simply be, as Petsch suggests, that Hamlet is here appealing to the conscience of the King to remember that God sees all.10
Miles interprets the nine additional lines of Q2 (III. iv. 204-12) as Hamlet's first revelation of an attempt to take advantage of such an opportunity:

Ther's letters sealed, and my two Schoolfellowes,  
Whom I will trust as I will Adders fang'd,  
They beare the mandat, they must sweep my way  
And marshall me to knavery: let it work,  
For tis the sport to have the enginer  
Hoist with his own petar, an't shall goe hard  
But I will delve one yard belowe their mines,  
And blowe them at the Moone: o tis most sweete  
When in one line two crafts directly meete.(11)

Jenkins's note on 'knavery' here is interesting, because it indicates a refusal to contemplate Hamlet's taking the initiative (the a priori assumption is the Romantic one found in Goethe and Coleridge that he is too inward-looking and too kind to act ruthlessly): 'knavery' therefore is interpreted as 'to be suffered, of course, not committed by the speaker', cf. V. ii. 19' (the reference to 'royal knavery' in V. ii. 19 is not relevant to the point). For similar reasons 'marshall me to knavery' is glossed by Hibbard as 'ceremoniously conduct me into a trap'.12 It is clear from the next lines, however, that Hamlet is talking about taking a lead from his erstwhile schoolfellows; he will ‘blowe them at the Moone’ by ‘undermining’ them at their own game. In any case he has no idea at this point that they are leading him into a trap; he has simply lost all trust in them. ‘Marshall’ means ‘lead me to knavery’, as it does for Macbeth when he addresses the phantom dagger: ‘Thou marshall'st me the way that I was going’ (Macbeth, II. i. 42). Hamlet's position is clear: he has lost trust in the friendship of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and suspects they are being used in some way by the principal plotter ('engineer') Claudius, although he does not know exactly how until he opens the letter to the King of England on board ship. He will therefore take counter-measures and destroy their plans by the kind of underhand means ('knavery') they are using against him. Given this reading, it is not unreasonable to interpret the reference to 'two crafts' as a pun by which Hamlet is suggesting covertly (as is his wont) that the preparations for this counterplot are already under way in arranging a meeting of the two craft at sea. It is perhaps indiscreet of Hamlet even to hint obscurely at such intentions, but one of the most intriguing features of Hamlet's complex character is the all too human mixture of discretion and indiscretion in his conduct. At this stage it seems unlikely that his plan involves having Rosencrantz and Guildenstern killed, in spite of the violence of the metaphors; but a plan to engineer a quick and unexpected return to Denmark might well enable him to 'hoist' Claudius 'with his own petar’. Whether Hamlet has had time to arrange such a meeting is immaterial, so long as we feel there has been sufficient stage time. Claudius first mentions the intention of sending Hamlet to England in open conversation with Polonius, and in the presence of Ophelia, before the play scene (III. i. 171). Much happens between this and Hamlet's first mention of the journey, which Gertrude says she has ‘forgot’ (III. iv. 203)—a subtle intimation that she had the information some time before.

At this point it might be well to quote Miles's commentary on these lines:

One would think it required a miraculous allowance of critical obtuseness to ignore a counterplot so strikingly pre-arranged. Yet, opening Coleridge, you find ‘Hamlet's capture by the pirates: how judiciously in keeping with the character of the over-meditative Hamlet, ever at last determined by accident or by a fit of passion!’ And opening Ulrici … God save the mark! ‘Accident frustrates his plans. Captured by pirates he is set on shore in Denmark against his will’ etc. And opening Wilhelm Meister you find Hamlet's ‘capture by pirates, and the death of the two courtiers by the letter which they carried’, regarded as ‘injuring exceedingly the unity of the piece, particularly as the hero has no plan’. After such obvious, amazing misconception, one may be pardoned for believing he sees Two points in Ham

Unseized by the Germans yet.(13)
To make assurance doubly sure, comes the letter to Horatio, 'In the grapple, I boarded them; on the instant they got clear of our ship: so I alone became their prisoner. They have dealt with me like thieves of mercy; but they knew what they did'. Can circumstantial proof go further? Could any twelve men of sense on such a record, acquit Hamlet of being an accessory before, as well as after, the fact?(14)

The letter from Hamlet to Horatio (IV. vi. 17-20) is interpreted very differently by Jenkins (who quotes Miles at this point):

There is no justification for inferring (as Miles A Review of Hamlet, 1870, pp. 70-1 and recently in SQ, xxvi, 276-84) that they were therefore in league with Hamlet and the whole pirate encounter a plot to get him back to Denmark. In that case Hamlet could hardly have spoken of their 'mercy'. The implication is that they showed mercy in calculated exchange for services to be rendered.15

Jenkins's interpretation of the letter is not implausible if taken alone from what has preceded it and what is to come. Hamlet certainly seems to be giving the impression here to Horatio that the meeting with the pirates was fortuitous:

Ere we were two days old at sea, a pirate of very warlike appointment gave us chase. Finding ourselves too slow of sail, we put on a compelled valour, and in the grapple I boarded them. On the instant they got clear of our ship, so I alone became their prisoner. They have dealt with me like thieves of mercy. But they knew what they did: I am to do a turn for them … I have words to speak in thine ear will make thee dumb; yet are they much too light for the bore of the matter … Rosencrantz and Guildenstern hold their course for England; of them I have much to tell thee.

(IV. vi. 14-28)

Miles has not helped his case by omitting the words at the end of his quotation: 'I am to do a turn for them’, because it looks as if Hamlet is suggesting he did some sort of deal with the pirates on the spot, though it does not necessarily mean this. On the other hand, Hamlet's remark, ‘But they knew what they did’, sounds suspiciously like an acknowledgement that the whole episode was under control in a way not usually associated with fights at sea, and his description of their behaviour as like ‘thieves of mercy’ is not incompatible with Miles's view that the meeting had been prearranged, especially if he is not being totally frank with Horatio. ‘Thieves of mercy’ would be a good phrase to describe pirates who have agreed to his rescue plan, whether or not they have received good payment. Robert Petsch argues against Miles's view that Hamlet is sparing with the information he imparts to Horatio, arguing that Hamlet always treats Horatio ‘with boundless trust’,16 but the text of the play hardly bears out the contention. Hamlet has all along been economical in what he tells his friend: he refuses to explain what the Ghost has said to him, for instance (I. v. 123 f.), and he does not reveal that earlier plot to catch the conscience of the King until just before the players enter (III. ii. 75-87), although he has been hard at work for some time arranging it. Even in this letter he is too cautious to reveal how he has behaved towards his old school-fellows, and the information that they ‘hold their course for England’, while perfectly true, is full of the irony of disingenuousness. Miles's comment would appear to be justified: ‘Horatio's ignorance of the capture is no argument against its being premeditated. It would have been very unlike Hamlet, either to compromise his friend, who remained at Court in service of the King, or to extend his secret needlessly.’17

The implausibility of the story as Hamlet tells it also gives Hamlet's letter the impression of disingenuousness. It is difficult to believe that by chance Hamlet is the only person who boarded the pirate ship and that by chance the pirates immediately sailed away with Hamlet still on board without their attempting any further
assault. Pirate ships would presumably usually attack in order to seize more than the first man who came on board, even if they immediately (by chance) happened to recognize who he was and his potential for ransom. Shakespeare need not have given all these circumstantial details or made them so prominent unless he wanted to draw special attention to Hamlet's conduct on the occasion. Indeed Q1 makes no mention of pirates and is none the worse in its plotting for that. Many earlier commentators have found Hamlet's account of the encounter with the pirates implausible, including those who for one reason or another come to accept that the meeting was accidental. Lawrence, for instance, remarks that it 'strains probability',18 while the nineteenth-century commentator D.J. Snider remarks: ‘The whole proceeding is so suspicious that were such an event to occur in real life, everybody would think at once of collusion.’19 Petsch argues in general that the events of the story, as Hamlet tells it, are thoroughly in character, and in particular that the impulsiveness of Hamlet's nature would make his rash attempt to fight single-handed thoroughly typical.20 Our impression of Hamlet's character, however, must derive from the particularities of the text, not govern the text's interpretation, and it is these particularities that are in question here.

Jenkins follows earlier commentators in arguing that Hamlet's final account of the meeting with the pirates in Act V, scene ii is the key to understanding what happened. The dialogue at V. ii. 6-53, in which Hamlet gives Horatio an account of the forging of Claudius's letter to the King of England and the ultimate fate of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, clearly indicates, says Jenkins, that Hamlet's behaviour on board ship was the result of 'sudden inspiration', and so the author of the Shakespeare Quarterly article (Martin Stevens) is wrong. The same view had been taken some hundred years earlier by D.J. Snider, who finds Hamlet's description of what happened in this scene decisive in rejecting what he otherwise regards as the persuasive view that the meeting with the pirates was planned: ‘Yet this view, apparently so well founded, we must abandon when we read Hamlet's account of the affair (V. ii). In that he ascribes his action wholly to instinct; there was no premeditation, no planning at all.’21 Lawrence endorses this view in quoting Snider.22

Miles's interpretation of Hamlet's narrative at this point is very different: the opening of Claudius's letter to the King of England is

a sudden inspiration … It is the only second hope on which he can count; for if the chances of the sea prevent the contemplated rescue, he is infallibly lost without that earnest conjuration. The whole ‘rash’ undertaking is a supplemented plot; a reserved escape, an ‘indiscretion’ only meant to serve in case his pirate plot should fail.23

By opening the letter Hamlet providentially obtains the public proof of Claudius's guilt that he would otherwise lack, and he can thereby justify his actions before the Danish people when he finally takes his revenge.

In contrast to Jenkins's view that Hamlet links the finding of the letter and the meeting with the pirate ship as examples of providence coming to his aid, Miles contrasts the planning of the encounter with the pirates with the unplanned opening of the letter. Hamlet's second account of the episode (V. ii) says very little about the meeting with the pirates on the grounds that he has informed Horatio of that already (V. ii. 55). Instead he concentrates almost exclusively on the discovery of Claudius's letter and the substitution of his own version of it. His comments on the intervention of providence arise entirely in the context of the narrative concerning the letter, and it is therefore not unreasonable to conclude that that is what it is referring to. Miles's view seems to me much more closely in accordance with Hamlet's words than that of either Jenkins or Snider:

Rashly—
And prais'd be rashness for it: let us know
Our indiscretion sometimes serves us well
When our deep plots do pall; and that should learn us
There's a divinity that shapes our ends,
Rough-hew them how we will.
Neither a chance meeting nor a planned meeting with the pirates could be regarded as an ‘indiscretion’, although Hamlet’s action in boarding the ship might be. But at this point Hamlet is describing the moments before he steals the letter, not the later event. The rashness clearly refers to the sudden decision to steal the letter just before he leaves his cabin to seek out in the dark the sleeping Rosencrantz and Guildenstern (V. ii. 12-18). Hamlet only cursorily mentions the sea-fight next day nearly forty lines later (V. ii. 53-5). He must, therefore, be contrasting the unpremeditated opening of the letter with those ‘deep plots’ that he fears may have gone wrong—if he is thinking of a particular ‘deep plot’ it could only be the one Miles mentions, for he is hardly likely to be looking at the matter from Claudius’s point of view. It is worth noting that Shakespeare does not use the word Pope thought appropriate here—‘fail’—but ‘pall/paule’, a word meaning ‘falter’, suggesting doubt over whether it (‘they’) will succeed or not. At the moment he is referring to he would not have known whether the agreement with the pirates was going to succeed. Miles’s interpretation is further strengthened by the imagery of lines 10-11, for if he had arranged the meeting with the pirates he would have ‘rough-hewn’ a plan that providence then refined by inspiring the impromptu opening of the letter. ‘Rough-hew’ would seem to be a perfect expression to describe the formulation of the plan, for there seems to have been no specific plan for dealing with Claudius when Hamlet arrives back. Imagery could hardly have a greater preciseness. The main argument, then, that Jenkins produces to defend his position turns out to be flawed. The orthodoxy that Lawrence, Jenkins, and Hibbard espouse is seen to be based on the a priori assumption that Hamlet lacks the initiative to finish the task of revenge, not on a plausible reading of the text (especially the Q2 text).

It is strange, however, that the best evidence to justify Miles’s viewpoint comes from the text that also includes that long soliloquy ‘How all occasions do inform against me’ (IV. iv. 32-66) that the Folio suppresses. Strange because while the plot to meet up with the pirates suggests verve and initiative, the soliloquy is the most insistent example of that other theme in the play, Hamlet’s own doubt and uncertainty whether he is able to carry out the revenge entrusted to him. It is apparent, however, that throughout Hamlet Shakespeare has tried to steer a difficult course between a sufficiently heroic tragic protagonist and the profound psychological interest in the character that results from Hamlet’s constant introspection, which is the play’s greatest achievement. That even some of his contemporaries had doubts whether he had achieved the right balance is evident (if somewhat obscurely) from two very different contemporary reactions to the play. For instance, in the account given of Burbage’s interpretation of the part in the anonymous funeral elegy of 1618 (although scanty it gives his role as Hamlet the fullest treatment), we seem to be hearing of a vigorous, heroic figure:

He’s gone and with him what a world are dead,  
Which he revived, to be revived so.  
No more young Hamlet, old Hieronimo,  
Kind Lear, the grieved Moor, and more beside,  
That lived in him, have now for ever died.  
Oft have I seen him leap into the grave,  
Suiting the person, which he seemed to have,  
Of a sad lover, with so true an eye  
That there I would have sworn he meant to die;  
Oft have I seen him play this part in jest,  
So lively that Spectators and the rest  
Of his sad crew, whilst he but seemed to bleed,  
Amazed, thought even then he died indeed.(25)

On the other hand the parody of Hamlet by Shakespeare’s fellow playwrights Marston, Chapman, and Jonson in the Blackfriars’ play Eastward Ho! mocks the lady Gertrude’s footman called Hamlet for his unheroic incompetence in love (‘he gives no … milke, as I have an other servant does’, III. ii. 44-5), as well as his incompetence in his other duties. The very fact that he is given the role of a servant emphasizes the
playwrights' view that he is unsuitable to be a tragic hero.

This is, no doubt, slight evidence to go on, but it might give us an indication of why Q2 and F differ as they do. In Q2 the attempt to strike a balance involves the inclusion both of the lines in which Hamlet expresses his wish to blow his enemies to the moon and his determination to outplay Claudius in knavery, shortly followed by a long soliloquy accusing himself of unnecessary delay, of cowardice, and of 'thinking too precisely on the event' (IV. iv. 41). The two passages are not absolutely contradictory since the soliloquy ends with a resolution to affect bloody thoughts from henceforth, a sentiment which, it could be argued, inspires the earlier passage. On the other hand there is a considerable contradiction in the tone of self-confidence with which he punningly announces his plan of action and the despondency and self-recrimination of the soliloquy. This contradiction becomes more disruptive if (as I have argued) the plan that Hamlet is announcing in his pun on 'crafts' turns out to have been put into effect later. The objection, of course, is not that people may not realistically be self-contradictory in this way, but that the suggestion of inadequacy in the soliloquy and the retrospective futility it accords the earlier vaunting (which in the light of the soliloquy is made to look like braggadocio) undermine Hamlet's tragic status. By taking out both these passages in the Folio text Shakespeare (assuming the modification is Shakespeare's) avoids both the element of contradiction and making so large an issue of Hamlet's inadequacy, though of course the issue is raised elsewhere in the play. A further consequence is to make the plan to meet the pirates more obscure and indeed, as the history of Hamlet commentary suggests, invisible to most subsequent readers. The same process of wanting to make Hamlet's initiative less prominent may also account for the substitution in F of 'deare plots' for Q2's 'deep plots' (V. ii. 9), for while 'deep' might well hark back to the mining metaphor of III. iv. 196-8, its change to 'deare' seems to suggest the more general theme of the vanity of human wishes. Even the question mark in F in place of the full stop in Q2, after Hamlet's repetition of Claudius's order that he must embark for England: 'For England?' (IV. iii. 47), is a curious addition seeing that Hamlet has informed his mother earlier that the order has already been given (III. iv. 202). It would be wrong, however, to insist here on a more precise interpretation of punctuation than Elizabethan practice required.

The influence of the F reading seems to have prevailed in spite of its greater obscurity, but there may have been another influence at work in masking Shakespeare's intention here. There is some evidence that there has been a shift in stage presentation of Shakespeare over the years away from emphasis on speech performance and towards a greater emphasis on action and stage business. Bertram Joseph, in his excellent account of the importance of elocution in the Elizabethan educational system and its influence on Shakespeare's style, suggests a level of aural sophistication in Shakespeare's contemporary audiences that no modern audience could hope to match. The importance given to recitation not only accounts for the delight in the set speech in Elizabethan drama, but also for the propensity towards elaborate 'undramatic' narrative accounts of offstage events. There is some evidence too, I think, that Elizabethan stage presentation was considerably more static than our modern approach allows. We know, for instance, that it was the custom before Garrick for actors to stand around, inattentive to the speaker, until it was their turn to speak—which suggests that long speeches were treated more like operatic arias than as parts of realistic dialogue. Indeed we are informed by Francis Gentleman in his Dramatic Censor (1770) that it was common practice before Garrick to 'sing' Shakespeare's lines: '[Garrick] certainly, as a lover of nature, despised the titum-ti, monotonous sing-song then fashionable, and indeed equally admired, till within these last thirty years'. Some hint that these 'operatic' techniques applied in Shakespeare's day is provided by that same anonymous elegy to Burbage I have already quoted, for there we are told that the other actors on stage, like the audience, were 'amazed' by Burbage's lifelike performance, suggesting that they were less concerned with responding in character than as ordinary onlookers. The new Globe in London, with its obscuring onstage pillars, also suggests, I think, that Elizabethan audiences were willing to accept a more static presentation of the acting that perhaps allowed the speaker to come forward, as in the older style of opera production on the modern stage. The fact that now even modern opera production, with its highly artificial conventions, attempts—sometimes ludicrously—a degree of realistic movement, shows how absurdly far we have gone along the road of misunderstanding the conventional nature of all drama. However, this is not the place to discuss acting techniques, but merely to
point out that such tendencies towards stage realism add to the obscurity of Shakespeare's intentions.

Hamlet's meeting with the pirates is presented entirely in narrative in the play; we see nothing of the action on stage, while the prominence of the meditative Hamlet on stage with his soul-searching soliloquies has become all the more highlighted by the contrast with the activity that surrounds him. This might be at least part of the explanation why Miles's plausible reading of the text of *Hamlet* has been either ignored or condemned out of hand. The same fate has attended the more recent attempt to revive the argument by Martin Stevens in the *Shakespeare Quarterly*. The difference in the two texts of the play may indicate that the process of undermining Hamlet's heroic status may have been begun by Shakespeare himself, or at least by the players' interpretation of the play during Shakespeare's lifetime. If this softening of the Prince occurred so early, it might also account for why, even in the early responses to the play, we find a discrepancy between those, like Burbage's elegist in 1618 and the caricature of Hamlet in *Eastward Ho!*

**Notes**

1. As quoted in *Variorum Hamlet*, ed. H.H. Furness (London and Philadelphia, Pa., 1877), i. 354. Furness may be quoting from the version of Miles's commentary in the *Southern Review* (Apr./July 1870), which I have not seen. The version of this sentence in the Boston publication, G. Miles, *A Review of Hamlet* (Boston, Mass., 1870, reprinted 1907), from which I generally quote, is somewhat toned down.
2. W.W. Lawrence, ‘Hamlet's Sea Voyage’, *PMLA* 59 (1944), 53 n. 23.
7. Ibid., note to III. iv. 212.
24. There seems little doubt that this is what Shakespeare wrote even though ‘corrected’ versions of Q2 change the word to ‘fall’.


27. See Critical Responses to Hamlet, ed. Farley-Hills, i. 216.

Criticism: Language And Imagery: R. Chris Hassel, Jr.
(essay date 1999)


[In the following essay, Hassel examines the mouse and mousetrap imagery in Hamlet.]

When Hamlet names “The Murder of Gonzago” for Claudius, he calls it “The Mousetrap”, adding, “Marry how? Tropically”. Since Hamlet has already told us that he hopes to use the play to “catch the conscience of the king” (2.2.591), we quickly hear several teasing puns and figures. Hamlet the mouser may be playfully connecting the “trap” of “trapically” with the “marry” of Claudius' marriage to “his mouse” Gertrude. He is also probably punning on “tropically” as “in the way of a trope; metaphorically, figuratively”, using the common Renaissance figure of the mousetrap as “A device for enticing a person to his destruction or defeat”. But though we quickly get Hamlet’s “tropical” gist, his general meaning, we have not done so well with its ingenious particularity. John Doebler has made a good start by suggesting that the well-known Augustinian trope of the muscipula diaboli, the mousetrap of the devil, highlights and informs the mouse and mousetrap imagery in Hamlet. Doebler also shows that popular Renaissance beast-lore combines with this theological context to present in a mouse-like Claudius “all that was gluttonous, lascivious, corrupt, and defiling”:

“What better image for the corrupter of Denmark, the polluter of the royal wedding bed, the one who banqueted in a time proper to mourning? Claudius is consistently presented by Shakespeare as being both diabolic and erotic.”

However, by focusing his interpretation almost exclusively on Claudius and by assuming a basically redemptive Hamlet, Doebler misses some of the most interesting possibilities of this material. What are we to make, for example, of Hamlet's perplexing portrayal as mouse and mouser, the tragic destroyer paired ambiguously with the heroic redeemer? How are we to understand Hamlet’s problematic fury over what he considers Gertrude's excessive lasciviousness, and the resultant associations of his mother with the mouse and the mousetrap? Doebler has also left relatively unexplored the traditional associations of the mouse with secretive destructiveness and the play's persistent pairing of the destructive and the lascivious Claudius. Undetected mouse-predators, mouse-banes, and mouse-medicines are also lurking in the darker corners of Hamlet. Legendary mouse-quellers like St. Gertrude and Apollo may share some of these hiding places. Finally, theological and iconographic traditions may connect Hamlet with Joseph the archetypal maker of mousetraps in ways that Doebler has not suggested. Neither Shakespeare, his characters, nor his audience could be expected to have kept all of these associations suspended in one rich and contradictory mixture, but each would have known some of them. The quality of their theatrical experience, and ours, is enhanced by their recovery. Let us start our own unique and imperfect concoction with Gertrude.

GERTRUDE AS MOUSE AND MOUSETRAP

Hamlet embarrasses Ophelia with his quips about “country matters”, lying in “laps” and “between maids' legs” just before the “mousetrap” play begins, and he jokes easily with his schoolmates about Fortune's
“secret parts” (3.2.109, 113; 2.2.232). However, from the start of the play he is also obsessed by what he perceives as his mother's lasciviousness. He calls her sexual “frailty” worse than “a beast”, who would with “wicked speed” “post / With such dexterity to incestuous sheets” (1.2.146, 150-51, 156-57). He insults her more publicly with the Player-Queen's outrageous promise of a fidelity that will survive her first husband's death: “Such love must needs be treason in my breast”, she says, and “A second time I kill my husband dead / When second husband kisses me in bed” (3.2.170, 176-77). In her closet after the play, Hamlet is even more voluble on the subject of what he considers Gertrude's inappropriate lust. It is at the end of this scene that Hamlet spits out Claudius's sobriquet “mouse”, the name he imagines his stepfather using when he is about to make love to Gertrude (3.4.184). “What have I done”, she asks him, “Ay me, what act”? (3.4.40, 52). His answer roars and thunders her salaciousness at her:

[It] blurs the grace and blush of modesty,  
Calls virtue hypocrite, takes off the rose  
From the fair forehead of an innocent love,  
And sets a blister there, makes marriage vows  
As false as dicers' oaths.  

(3.4.42-46)

“[S]uch a deed / […] from the body of contraction plucks / The very soul, and sweet religion makes / A rhapsody of words!” Her lust and the resultant times are to Hamlet “ulcerous”, “corrupt”, “infesting unseen”, “pursy” or corpulent, like a “compulsive ardor” to “charge” in battle. She has let reason pander to will, virtue's wax melt in the flaming fires of youth. She lies in “the rank sweat of an enseamed bed, / Stewed in corruption, honeying and making love / Over the nasty sty.” At Hamlet's urging Gertrude finally sees in her own soul “such black and grained spots / As will not leave their tinct” (3.4.46-49, 148-50, 154, 83-89, 91-95). Of course, this general remorse does not concede all of Hamlet's outrageous charges against her. Gertrude certainly comes off better than her son in this scene, who seems if not mad drunk with a moral outrage and an accompanying misogyny that would seem to indict his own imbalance as much as his mother's lust.

This “mouse” Hamlet refers to could of course be merely a term of endearment in Shakespeare and the proverbs and poems of his near-contemporaries. In *Love's Labour's Lost* (5.2.19), for example, Rosaline calls Katherine “mouse” innocently enough. We see the potential misogyny more clearly in *Romeo and Juliet*. When Lady Capulet wants to call her husband “a nocturnal prowler after women” (Pelican gloss), she says “You have been a mouse-hunt in your time” (4.4.11). The joke or the insult can be gender-neutral, as in the poem “Our Sir John” a century or so before Shakespeare, where neither the woman nor the friar can resist their lust:

Ser Iohn ys taken in my mouse-trappe:  
ffayne wold I haue hym bothe nyght and day.  
hethropyth so nyyselye a-bought my lape,  
I haue no pore to sa[y hym nay.](6)

But while Andreas Alciatus and Edward Topsell concede that “white mouse” or “bad mouse” can be applied as Doebler does “to a man who is lascivious or of immoderate lust”, this pejorative is more commonly applied to a woman. Topsell reflects the misogynistic early modern commonplace that among mice (and men of course) “the female is much more venerious than the male”, and Meyer Schapiro mentions from popular tradition that the mouse is often “the womb, the unchaste female, the prostitute”. Topsell illustrates this same prejudice when he credits Alciatus with the saying, “she was a mouse's hole, signifying that her virginity was lost, and that she suffered any lovers as a mouse-hole doth any mouse”. This tradition of the salacious female mouse is so strong that the story reappears in many sources of a dead pregnant female mouse cut open to reveal “all the young females within her belly […] also found pregnant”. English proverbs are also fond of connecting the devil's entrapment of human lust with the mousetrap. One of Whiting's proverbs reads
“Women are the devil's mousetraps”, and a similar one in the Oxford Proverbs “Women are the devil's nets”. The mouse is also in the popular tradition an animal in which witches and the devil sometimes manifest themselves, and a form taken by the graven images of vicious, malignant, and evil gods. As Schapiro says, “the mousetrap is, at the same time, a rich condensation of symbols of the diabolical and the erotic and their repression; the trap is both a female object and the means of destroying sexual temptation”.

Though it wears a fur coat, the misogyny woven into the lining of this tradition is as clear as the female lasciviousness it purports to describe. However unfair it is to Gertrude, she is to her son this “unchaste female”, virtually Alciatus's emblem of female lasciviousness. As Hamlet urges his mother Gertrude to amend what he considers her lack of chastity and sanctity, “Repent what's past, avoid what is to come,” (3.4.151), he often uses terms that suggest the diabolic as well as the erotic associations of the mouse. Her lust is like “Rebellious hell”, mutinying “in a matron's bones”. This “Devil” “of habits” is lust as well as custom, and Claudius seems to be, and to bear, the “devil” lust that “cozened” Gertrude “at hoodman-blind”. If she can just “[r]efrain to-night”, Hamlet says, “that shall lend a kind of easiness / To the next abstinenec; the next more easy”. Not to repress her sexuality, yielding to Claudius's “damned fingers”, is yielding to the devil himself. With practice she will be able to “either … the devil, or throw him out / With wondrous potency” (3.4.77-84, 162-171). I would conjecture “trip” or “trap” against the more traditional “curb” or “quell” for the missing verb here, especially since Hamlet names her “mouse” and asks her to help him trap Claudius at the end of this conversation: “Let the bloat king tempt you again to bed, / Pinch wanton on your cheek, call you his mouse” (3.4.183-84). But Hamlet's fear that she will not be able to abstain from Claudius' bed even after all of his chastising words also confirms the lyric's picture of a woman with “no power to say him nay”.

The tension between Hamlet's perception and his mother's reality is emphasized by one of the most curious pieces of mouse-lore in Hamlet. St. Gertrude of Nivelle, a woman of great sanctity and absolute chastity, was well-known in England and throughout northern Europe because she stopped a plague of mice. She was for this reason invoked as often as the more material vermifuge wormwood against rats and mice, and is pictured iconographically with mice running around her or on her crozier. One wonders if Shakespeare changed her name from Geruthe in Belleforest to emphasize Hamlet's confusion? Hamlet's “That's Wormwood” just as the Player-Queen is about to “protest too much” her eternal fidelity to her first husband could inject more mouse-lore into his relationship with Gertrude (3.2.173; 221-22). Wormwood is of course both rotten timber and the bitter Biblical taste of contrition or mortification. It is also according to Topsell a common herbal remedy against mice: “Wormwood laid among clothes, and skins, defend them from mice; and also the water of wormwood sod, sprinkled upon clothes, hath the same operation” (p. 512). Hamlet seems to hope that once the “mouse” of Gertrude's lasciviousness is out, once his own “wormwood” has begun to have its shriving way with his mother, he will be able to persuade her to be wormwood as well as taste and use it, to repel the mouse of her own lust and Claudius in whom it resides.

Oedipal impulses compete with self-righteous ones as Hamlet perceives his mother as the paradoxical combination of subject and object of temptation, attraction and repulsion of lust. He seems to see her at once as the snare that catches the devil Claudius (and the son Hamlet?) in lust, and snared herself in the same devil's mousetrap. She is a potentially repellent wormwood who tastes in her own mouth its corrective gall even while inspiring Hamlet's galling words. In most productions, Hamlet's repulsion and attraction are blazoned across the stage or screen in the looming bed on which they often perform some enigmatic rite. Only in some productions, most notably the Olivier Hamlet, does Gertrude cool towards Claudius after the bedroom scene, apparently as a direct result of Hamlet's shriving. The 1982 Time-Life BBC videotape is I think more characteristic, where Gertrude remains Patrick Stewart's mouse. In almost every case Hamlet's perception of his mother's demonic sexuality competes interestingly with her more modest representation on the stage. Commonly her own allegiance remains as painfully divided as Hamlet's relationship to her.

THE LASCIVIOUS AND DESTRUCTIVE CLAUDIUS
In Shakespeare's *Henry V* the destructiveness of the mouse is thought of as underhanded, secretive work, sometimes connected to human thievery; the “weasel Scot” “[c]omes sneaking, and so sucks her princely eggs, / Playing the mouse in absence of the cat” (1.2.170-72). “Mouse” can also be a verb meaning “to ransack, rummage, pillage”: “They have rifled and mowsed the cofer by a false key thei made” (1589) (*OED* 2 *Mouse* 4). Whiting cites an English proverb about destructiveness from 1546, “A mouse in time may bite a cable in two” (M738). In *Troilus and Cressida* Nestor is similarly called “that stale old mouse-eaten dry cheese” (5.4.9-10). Sometimes the mouse's destructiveness takes on especially sacrilegious, even diabolical overtones. Noah, according to Riegler, had to throw his glove at a mouse that was gnawing away at the hull of the Ark, and Rowland illustrates it “nibbling the sacred host”, the communion wafer.12

In describing Claudius, Hamlet characteristically connects the lascivious and the destructive, the main characteristics that Alciatus, Shakespeare and the English proverbs all associate with the mouse. In fact, their pairing becomes something of a formula for understanding his mouse-uncle. Just before Hamlet decides to use the play as “the thing / Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king”, he calls Claudius a “Bloody, bawdy villain”, and then a “treacherous, lecherous” one for killing his father and marrying his mother. His act is both “remorseless” in its destructiveness and “kindless”, unnatural, in its heedless, incestuous lechery. We hear another reference to this pair of sins in the line “Upon whose property and most dear life / A damned defeat was made” (2.2.590-91, 565-66, 555-56). In Hamlet's eyes Gertrude as well as the kingdom is the erotic property, his father's the diabolically destroyed life. Finally, in Act 5, Claudius is called “incestuous, mur'd'rous damned Dane” by Hamlet and “carnal, bloody, and unnatural” (5.2.314, 370) by Horatio. Earlier in the same scene Hamlet describes Claudius as “He that hath killed my king, and whored my mother” (5.2.64). Claudius is “Bloody, bawdy villain”, and “treacherous, lecherous, kindless villain”; he has “killed” and “whored”; he is “incestuous, murderous”, “carnal, bloody”. Such concise and formulaic statements of the destructive and lascivious impulses in this Claudius reinforce Hamlet's obsession with his uncle as the perfect quarry for a mousetrap.

The ghost of Hamlet's father is similarly fixated on Claudius's combination of lechery and treachery. He calls him “that incestuous, that adulterate beast”, who “won to his shameful lust / The will of my most seeming-virtuous queen”. Claudius is “lewdeness”, “lust”, “garbage” in the same sequence. Denmark's bed is called “A couch for luxury and damned incest” (1.5.42, 45-46, 54-57, 83). At the same time that Hamlet is hearing what his father's ghost describes as Gertrude's “lust” and “luxury” with Claudius, he learns of his destruction of his father's body and the imperilment of his soul. “The leperous distilment […] / […] a most instant tetter barked about / Most lazar-like with vile and loathsome crust / All my smooth body”, and left me “Unhouseled, disappointed, unaeled, / No reck'ning made, but sent to my account / With all my imperfections on my head” (1.5.64, 71-73, 77-79). Hamlet hears of this lechery and destructiveness, and he believes. As late as 4.4.56-57 the formula still holds: “How stand I then, / That have a father killed, a mother stained?” Treacherous, lecherous Claudius is a memory that never leaves “the book and volume of [Hamlet's] brain” or his father's (1.5.103).

Claudius shares this dual perception. To Polonius's “‘Tis too much proved, that with devotion's visage / And pious action we do sugar o'er / The devil himself” (3.1.47-49), Claudius replies:

> How smart a lash that speech doth give my conscience!  
> The harlot's cheek, beautied with plast'ring art,  
> Is not more ugly to the thing that helps it  
> Than is my deed to my most painted word.

(3.1.50-53)

In this self-indictment Claudius admits killing his own brother and covering it up, sugaring it o'er, with the “plast'ring art” of the harlot. But though experiencing “The Mousetrap” may remind Claudius of his sexual as
well as his political guilt, the king is more concerned about his treachery than his lechery as a result of seeing the play. He mentions the queen as one of the “effects for which I did the murder”, but the “rank” offense, the crime that “smells to heaven”, the “primal eldest curse” is Cain’s sin, “A brother’s murder” (3.3.54, 36-38). Catching Claudius’s conscience in that treachery is also the primary purpose of Hamlet's strategy. It is “murder, though it have no tongue, [which] will speak”, and “the murder of my father” (2.2.579, 581) that he will play before his uncle. Claudius feels deep remorse after “The Mousetrap”, but “Though inclination be as sharp as will” he says that he cannot give up “th’effects” of his sin, the sexual and political property he has gained by killing his brother. Thus in the midst of his apparent moment of honest contrition, honest self-appraisal, a moment of “purging” close to “heaven” in Hamlet's mistaking eyes, Claudius is still ironically self-deceived. By confusing “can” and “will” he implies that he is unable to repent, rather than unwilling. But he will not repent. Therefore his prayer, beyond Hamlet's wildest hopes, “Has no relish of salvation in’t”. Though Claudius's “heels may kick at heaven”, “his soul may be as damned and black / As hell, whereto it goes” (3.3.39, 54, 85, 74, 65-66, 92-95). Even without Hamlet's help, Claudius is hell-bound.

Of the dumb-show to “The Mousetrap”, Hamlet tells Ophelia “This is miching mallecho; it means mischief” (3.2.131-32). Is Hamlet referring here not only to his own mischief but also to the mouse-thief of his father's life, crown and wife, and of his own hopes? Hanmer thought it meant “secret, covered, hidden iniquity”, from the Spanish malhecho. So did Malone (misdeed). Warburton preferred lying in wait for the poisoner, from the eponym Malhechor (who is probably a criminal rather than a poisoner). Capell suggests an ill-looking, munching animal, compared to the mean figure of the poisoner in the dumb-show, and paralleling the Iniquity figure from the moralities.13 In *Henry IV, Part 1* a similar miche munches blackberries (2.4.389-390). Combining these readings could yield “munching mischief”, with Claudius as the muncher. Interestingly, Robert Herrick once called such a stealing, sneaking creature a “miching mouse”, a phrase reminiscent of Hamlet's description of the “miching mallecho” of the murderer in the dumb-show. Whatever “mallecho” refers to, nonsense, mischief, poisoning, or something yet undiscovered, “miching” can definitely refer to the secretive destroying or theft of a mouse. But Hamlet could also be referring to himself and the play as the truant means to reverse the wrongs of the sneaking pilferer Claudius. This would support the image pattern of undermining the underminer, hoisting the engineer with his own petar (3.4.207-8), a secretive destruction that may be the mole's work as well as the mouse's. The “vicious mole of nature” (1.4.24) may then be the imperfection all must carry, even Hamlet, imaged as the underground destructiveness of these rodents that were associated with mice in the symbolic contours of the Renaissance mind.14 Once again, Hamlet seems both mouse and mouser in this ingenious imagery.

**HAMLET AS MOUSE AND MOUSER**

One of Hamlet's first insults of Claudius is the cryptic “I am too much in the sun” (1.2.67). We usually assume he means that he is closer than he wants to be, in kin if not in kind, to this new father-king, the sun of Denmark, and this is surely one of Hamlet's meanings. But in the same scene Hamlet also calls his father “Hyperion” to Claudius's “satyr” (1.2.140). Hyperion is the father of Helios, the sun-god who is identified with Apollo by the fifth century B.C. Is Hamlet playing Apollo to his father's Hyperion? One of the names by which Apollo (*Iliad* 1.39) is known, “Sminthius”, means “mouse-killer”. Like the St. Gertrude we mentioned earlier, Apollo eliminated a plague of mice to earn this epithet. Hamlet shares Apollo's idealized nature, his love of philosophy, his inculcation of virtue.15 Does he also share with him this role of exterminator? He certainly hopes to rid Denmark of its rodent-king. The connections are as provocative as they are unexpected.

There are grounds more relative than this. Predators of mice like the cat and the hawk and the owl occur in *Hamlet* in obscure but potentially threatening places. Hamlet's “The cat will mew” (5.1.279) during Ophelia's funeral promises the reassertion of the proper order of things, good triumphing over evil, morality and hierarchy restored. In *Henry V* the absent cat is understood as this sort of mice-warden (1.2.170-72). But pictures of gleeful mice (or rats) dancing around caged cats embody the same reversal of natural order that now seems to reign in Denmark. In the epigram in Geffrey Whitney's emblem book, for example, these mice
are called “the wicked sort”, the trapped cats “worthy men”. Even Dürer's little mouse in “The Fall of Man” is still held by the tail under Adam's foot, though he looks ready to spring loose as soon as Eve takes the serpent's proffered apple. The cat there looks languid; perhaps before the fall he knew nothing of mice, or of the need to catch them. Hamlet's “I know a hawk from a handsaw” is similarly elusive and threatening, possibly connecting competent predation and pruning with a carpenter's competence to tear down and rebuild. Hamlet's manipulative playfulness with Polonius about the weasel-shaped cloud (2.2.370; 3.2.364) adds another mouse-predator to the cat and the hawk. Topsell tells us that the weasel was the mouse's worst enemy, “not only more inclined to hunt after them, than the cat, but […] more terrible also unto them” (p. 508).

The cat-like, teasing method in Hamlet's madness is nowhere more clearly revealed than when he also refers to a mouse-bane just before “The Mousetrap”. begins. The king asks “How fares our cousin Hamlet?” Hamlet replies, “Excellent, i'faith, of the chameleon's dish” (3.2.89-90). Now the chameleon was thought, as Maplet and Topsell both reveal, to eat air, and so Hamlet is certainly referring to all of the false promises in the air of Denmark as well as Claudius's deceptive coloration. But Topsell tells us that chameleon (OED Chameleon 3) is also a potent mouse-poison: “The juice of the root of the herb Camelion, mixed with water and oil, draweth mice unto it, and killeth them by tasting thereof, if they drink not presently” (p. 512). Hamlet would indeed “fare” well if this mouse who is soon to be caught in “The Mousetrap” were drawn to eat of the chameleon's dish; unfortunately, their eating of death is almost simultaneous.

Oddly, mouse could also have had medicinal uses for Hamlet and his father. Topsell tells us, for example, that “the flesh of a mouse is hot and soft, […] and doth expel black and melancholy choler”. As Hamlet says of “my melancholy”, the devil “is very potent with such spirits” (2.2.588). But if young Hamlet could use some of this medicine, Topsell gives us three good reasons why Old Hamlet could also. First, “Mice being cut and placed into wounds which have been bitten by Serpents, […] do […] cure and perfectly heal them”. Old Hamlet calls his poisoner “The serpent that did sting thy father's life”. Second, as a result of Old Hamlet's poisoning, “a most instant tetter barked about / Most lazar-like with vile and loathsome crust / All my smooth body”. According to Topsell, “The dust of a mouse pounded and beaten to powder, and mixed with a certain oil, is very good and wholesome, for those which are grieved with a tetter or scab which may overrun their whole body”. Finally, mouse is also considered good for “pain in his ears” (pp. 514-16). Claudius, of course, “did pour / The lep'rous distilment” “into the porches” of Old Hamlet's ears (1.5.38, 71-73, 63-64).

Art historian James Snyder connects Joseph's mousetraps in the Merode Altarpiece to Joseph's apparent unimportance to Satan: “The marriage of Mary and Joseph was staged to make the miraculous birth of Christ less conspicuous to Satan by hiding the fact of his divine parentage. According to Saint Augustine, the marriage took place to fool the devil just as mice are fooled by the bait of the trap.” Hamlet, playing the fool or madman with Polonius, Claudius, Ophelia and Gertrude just before the performance of his own "Mousetrap", hopes similarly to disarm his adversaries by exaggerating his own weakness and asserting therefore his implausibility as an avenger. The second of Hamlet's two carpenter images, “There's a divinity that shapes our ends, / Rough—hew them how we will—", also connects Hamlet with Joseph as two carpenters humbly acquiescing in the superior craftsmanship of providence. Hamlet's “I must be idle” underlines this strategy of disarming humbleness. But the many negatives of Claudius's “Nor what he spake […] / Was not like madness.” suggest that he is alerted, not disarmed, by the feigning conversation with Ophelia: “I do doubt the hatch and the disclose / Will be some danger;” (5.2.10-11; 3.2.87; 3.1.163-64, 66-67). He will not be an easy prey for Hamlet's mousetrap.

Punctuated as it is with the poisoned rapier and the poisoned cup, the final scene illustrates one last time how often the play's imagery of ironic reversal is associated with iconography of mouse and mousetrap. The rapier, which can symbolize honor but also sexuality and murder, is here the rodent king's means to pervert honor in a last underhanded plot of destructive treachery. The cup, emblem of fellowship and forgiveness but also of gluttony, serves Claudius's mouse-like drunkenness until the end, and then joins the rapier in more secretive and destructive mischief. Even Claudius's mouse Gertrude dies by coming between the incensed points of
these fearful adversaries. “Not a mouse stirring” is the tenth line of the play. In *Hamlet* the trap eventually silences all of them. Doeblcr finds clarity and closure as he finishes his exploration of the imagery of mouse and mousetrap in *Hamlet*. Hamlet is the redeemer; Claudius is the villain; Gertrude is discreetly omitted from the picture. But to me the transparent paradox that the trapper must himself die to purify a diseased kingdom, “set it right”, (1.5.189) is not the play’s last word.

The mousetrap trope becomes instead part of a pattern of images in *Hamlet* that poises the clarity of poetic justice against a universe of dark unknowing. On the one hand Laertes proclaims himself caught “as a woodcock to mine own springe”, “justly killed with mine own treachery.” Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, who would “sweep [Hamlet’s] way / And marshall [him] to knavery.”, will instead serve as “sport to have the engineer / Hoist with his own petar”. Hamlet “will delve one yard below their mines / And blow them at the moon.” Polonius “find’st to be too busy is some danger.” Finally, Claudius is “hurt” with his own “envenomed” point. But as Horatio summarizes the play we are challenged to question Laertes’ naive and dying notion that Claudius is “justly served”, even if “It is a poison tempered by himself” that kills him, and forced to look again at Hamlet's reassuring if momentary sense of “a divinity that shapes our ends, / Rough—hew them how we will—”. To Horatio the “judgments” seem “accidental” and the “slaughters” “casual”. What “purposes” there are, in the human universe, at least, are “mistook”. Horatio may hope of Hamlet that “flights of angels sing thee to thy rest”; but neither angels nor providence are asserted to govern similarly these “carnal, bloody, and unnatural acts” on earth. Hamlet is part of Horatio's bloody summary. Mouse and mouser are all carried off in the end by “this fell sergeant, Death,” Augustine's "Bailiff", and we are left deeply moved but also darkling.

One last proverbial tradition concerning the mouse would seem apposite to this troublesome denouement. In 1629 T. Adams says in a sermon: “The empiric to cure the fever, destroys the patient; so the wise man, to burn the mice, set on fire his barn.” In 1816 Wolcot (P. Pindar) echoes this commonplace in his 2nd Epistle to Mrs. Clarke (WKS. 4:446), when he says, “Who, but a Bedlamite, would fire his house / To wreak his vengeance on a pilfering mouse”.22 One answer, apparently, is Hamlet. His reluctant doctoring loses a lot of patients, breaks a lot of bones, to reset time's dislocated joint. Is he then a Bedlamite? Hamlet the obsessed son and spiritual physician may think that only contribution, the wormwood of mortification, can cool those “fires that mutine in a matron's bones”. Hamlet the moral and political exterminator may hope that his complex arsenal might at once expel the mouse-like lust in his too-lascivious mother and deter the object of her lust, the devilish, mouse-king Claudius, thus killing two mice with one application. Hamlet says he “must be cruel only to be kind,” and he and Laertes also apparently “exchange forgiveness” (3.4.179; 5.2.318, 321), but neither the prince nor his audience can know how his wholesale destructiveness will weigh against the cure in the balance. The inner mystery in this play is almost as dark as the outer. On earth at least, here if not hereafter, Hamlet is punished along with his victims in his double role. And though he promises his mother earlier to “answer well / The death I gave” (3.4.177-78), such answers are not much in evidence in Denmark's dark world of mice and mousers.

Far from “plucking out the heart of his mystery”, this learning impresses us with the unfathomable complexity of Hamlet's mind and his heart, as he plays, and is, Gertrude's loving but imperfect son and Denmark's scourge and minister. His lowest note would be the mischievous schoolboy, the sadistic spoilsport, the frustrated prince and the obsessive reformer, revelling in the public and private embarrassment and bitterness he is causing the mice Gertrude and Claudius to suffer. The “top of [his] compass” would be Hamlet's enactment of the deepest caring and the profoundest ministry to the “black and grained spots” of his mother's immortal soul. But even in that ministry there is something rank, choleric and diseased. We may play upon Hamlet even as we tease so “much music”, such “excellent voice” (3.2.353-54) out of Shakespeare's uses of mouse and mousetrap lore. We cannot thereby know Hamlet, any more than Hamlet can know himself. In Denmark's unweeded garden it is as hard to distinguish mouse from mouser as it is to know which plants are poisonous, and which medicinal.
Notes


4. “Swine” is also one of Luther's favorite metaphors for our uncontrolled desires; see *Index*, (ed. by) Joel W. Lunder in *Luther's Works* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986), for over thirty references. See “Hamlet’s ‘Too, Too Solid Flesh’” in *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 25 (1994), 609-22, for my argument that Luther's idea of the prudence or wisdom of the flesh might gloss Hamlet's problems with doing and knowing perfectly in a fallen world.


14. Topsell affirms this belief by disagreement (p. 498).


17. See Pelican gloss; see also John Maplet, *A Green Forest, or a Natural History* (London: Henry Denham, 1567), p. 76, and Topsell, p. 114; Topsell is, however, skeptical.


20. “Drunk as a mouse” is a common simile from the 14th to the 16th century. Whiting gives examples from Chaucer, Lydgate, Greene, Skelton, and three others.

21. 5.2.295-96; 3.4.205-10, 34; 5.2.310-17, 10-11, 369-74, 349, 325. So Schapiro, “*Muscipula*”, p. 182, translates Augustine's “*quasi praepositus mortis*”, when, speaking of the devil's mousetrap, he says “He has rejoiced in Christ's death, like a bailiff of death.”


**Hamlet (Vol. 59): Criticism: Sources**


[In the following essay, originally published in 1986, Guilfoyle traces Ophelia's character to the legend of Mary Magdalen as developed in medieval drama.]

The virtuous disguise of evil in woman is described most bitterly by Shakespeare in *King Lear* (IV.vi.120-29): “Behold yond simpering dame / Whose face between her forks presages snow … / But to the girdle do the gods inherit, / Beneath is all the fiends'.” If she can be separated from sexual considerations, for example in royalty or in comedy, woman can appear on a level with, if not equal to, man; but where his feelings are most deeply aroused, in love and veneration, or in lust and frustration, the writer finds her angel or devil, separately or interchangeably. In the opening cantos of *The Faerie Queene*, Spenser presents the two pictures of woman which combine in a potent myth in the literature of all ages: the pure, young, innocent Una, characterized by her name, and her exact physical duplicate, who is, behind the façade, a filthy fiend. This sinister figure is later presented as Fidessa/Duessa, but in her first appearance she usurps the fair form of Una, the one truth. In one of the fragments of Euripidean tragedy, there is the saying “Woman brings to man the greatest possible succour, and the greatest possible harm.” The words for “greatest possible succour” are ophelian … megistan.

Ophelia's name links her to the idea of succor; “ower swete sokor” was a phrase used of Mary Magdalen in the Digby Magdalen play. In different ways, Ophelia and Magdalen embody the “angel/devil” dichotomy of woman, and the figure of Magdalen appears in the imagery of Ophelia's scenes throughout *Hamlet*. Conventions in Shakespeare are often hidden, because in his hands they do not appear conventional, but if the strands of the Magdalen legends are examined, it can be seen that many of them are woven into Ophelia's words and actions. These images reflect Shakespeare's preoccupation, not with the horrific figure described by Lear, but with innocence or good faith mistaken—for example, Desdemona mistaken by Othello, Hermione by Leontes, Imogen by Posthumus, Cordelia by Lear—and Ophelia by Hamlet. The young woman in the Saxo and Belleforest versions of the *Hamlet* story was not virtuous (and not, of course, called Ophelia); Shakespeare changes this into the figure which seems to have haunted him. The tragic mistake is explicit in *The Tragedy of Hoffman*, a crude revenge play which borrows much from *Hamlet* and may have been commissioned on the heels of *Hamlet's* success. Mathias describes the innocent Lucibella thus: “Shee is as harlots, faire, like guilded tombs / Goodly without; within all rottenness … Angel in show, / Divell in heart.”
In *The Faerie Queene*, angel and devil are presented in simple allegorical form, as two different figures that look the same. The Red Cross Knight abandons Una, because he assumes that the girl he finds *in flagrante dilectu* is his virgin fallen. In *Hamlet*, the duality is used differently, but basically the same thing happens. Hamlet abandons Ophelia, maligning her in the most brutal terms, because he assumes her to be corrupt or, at the least, on the first step downwards. Archimago creates the false Una; Hamlet, on this occasion as on others, combines the roles of hero and villain in creating for himself his false Ophelia. He, like the Red Cross Knight, is mistaken; but his mistake is not retrieved.

The presentation of the relationship between Hamlet and Ophelia at first seems contradictory. In Act I.iii Polonius and Laertes warn Ophelia that Hamlet's wooing may not be honorable, and she is instructed to avoid his importunities. It should be noted that his wooing is of recent date: “He hath my Lord of late made many tenders / Of his affection to me.” But in Act III.i, she appears as the neglected mistress and reproaches Hamlet for his coldness. This may be an inconsistency, but it may alternatively reflect a major change in Hamlet. Between the picture of the ardent young lover given by Ophelia to her father, and Hamlet's bitter comments to her father (II.ii.181ff) and to herself (III.i.103ff), there is the key encounter of Hamlet and Ophelia in her closet.

Images from the various Magdalen stories appear in all Ophelia's scenes except the “fatal mistake” scene in the closet, recounted in Act II.i. It is therefore entirely appropriate that this scene should be offstage, as an unseen key to the tragic role of Ophelia. For she is not the prostitute, the early Magdalen taunted by Hamlet in the nunnery scene; she is pure, as her name suggests and as her brother repeatedly describes her, “Whose worth … / Stood challenger on mount of all the age / For her perfections.” She is the figure not of the repentant sinner, but of the purity which can atone for the sins of others. She is to intercede, in her “orisons,” in the nunnery, as a ministering angel. Her prayers are all for others—“O help him, you sweet heavens!” “O heavenly powers, restore him!” “God dild you!” “God be at your table!” “God ha' mercy on his soul! And of all Christian souls I pray God,” “God bye you.” Her final utterance (reported) is “snatches of old lauds.” She opposes truth to Hamlet's feigning and feinting; he pretends to be mad, she is really mad; he meditates on death, she dies. Critics have noted that Ophelia never mentions her love for Hamlet. Her function goes far beyond that of a girl caught up in an unhappy love affair.

The Magdalen imagery serves to illumine on the one hand the succor which the pure Ophelia can offer through atonement; and on the other, the delusion of female wantonness from which Hamlet suffers and which is part of his tragedy.

“O my lord, my lord, I have been so affrighted!” introduces the description of Hamlet face to face with female depravity—depravity that exists only in his imagination, as the scene itself exists only in the imagination of the audience. Hamlet has seen something of the rottenness within in his mother's summary grief and incestuous marriage; he subsequently hears from the ghost the story of the murder, the stain of which, together with the stain of adultery, is added to the defaced image of his mother. Distracted, he runs to Ophelia, to gaze on the pure young face which between her forks presages snow. What he sees is presumably what Fradubio saw when he came upon Duessa bathing herself in origen and thyme, and saw her “in her proper hew.” Hamlet leaves Ophelia with his head over his shoulder in the gesture of the damned, that of the runner in Dante's seventh Circle of Hell, and of Trevisan fleeing Despair.

Hamlet makes no reference to Ophelia in the play until after this encounter. We hear of Hamlet as an ardent young lover and as the author of the exaggerated and very youthful jingle beginning “Doubt thou the stars are fire.” But once he has rejected womankind, including Ophelia, he never (until the funeral scene) speaks or refers to her except with the imagery of sexual corruption. He calls Polonius a fishmonger (or brothel keeper) and after what seems to be a passing reference to the sun breeding maggots in a dead dog, he says of the “fishmonger's” daughter: “Let her not walk i' the sun; conception is a blessing, but as your daughter may conceive—friend look to't.” Traditionally, the serpent's egg was hatched by the sun; Brutus, resolving on the
death of Caesar, decides to “think him as a serpent's egg / Which hatched, would as his kind grow mischievous” (Julius Caesar II.i.32-33). Ophelia's “kind” is now, in Hamlet's thoughts, the progeny of the serpent; and possibly, if we go back to the maggots, the swarming brood of Error, “soon conceiv'd,” which will devour its mother. With Ophelia in the nunnery scene, Hamlet is still haunted by this image: “Why wouldst thou be a breeder of sinners?”

From the time of his fatal mistake, Hamlet is without the support, the ophelia, that he needs. His mother is sunk in adultery, incest, and complicity in murder; he is forced to reject her, and with her he rejects all women, and Ophelia suffers the same fate as Una.

By Act IV, Ophelia's rejection is total, her brother gone, her father dead, her lover brutally estranged from her having killed her father and treated her as a prostitute. In her rejected state, she rejects reason. In this she is like Lear, and like Lear, she will die, the will to live being annihilated. In her mad scene she can only “play” the tragedy in which she is caught up, like Cassandra helplessly enacting what she can truly see but cannot intervene to prevent.

The mad scene is, at first glance, a jumble of songs, dialogue, and lament. However, characters who go mad in renaissance drama frequently speak more truth, and deeper truth than when sane, and this can be said of Ophelia (who is sadly confused when her wits are about her) as of Lear. It is the order of what she says that is disturbed. “Oh when degree is shak'd … the enterprise is sick”; conversely, in the Elizabethan world picture, when the mind is sick, the divine order by which man can live in harmony is shaken and in chaos. What happens to Ophelia is what she has described as having happened to Hamlet—the sweet bells are jangled, out of tune and harsh, as bells will be if rung out of order. The images of her mad scene show derangement in its literal sense, but they are nonetheless images of the truth—the truth in chaos because of the havoc in her mind. Laertes, who provides a commentary on her madness, sums this up when he says, “This nothing's more than matter.” It is “nothing” because evil derangement has taken over the order of a rational mind; but the disordered fragments are of something good and precious, which has been under attack ever since Hamlet's irruption “as if he had been loosed out of hell.”

The Magdalen legends bear strongly on the detail of Ophelia's mad scene, and it is therefore appropriate now to consider the outline of the legends. In these, the images of virtue and depravity in woman, as symbolic of the problem of good and evil, provide the emotive power. Little of this power can be gleaned from the New Testament. The legends grew firstly by the identification of various women mentioned in the Gospels as the one Magdalen—including the woman taken in adultery, the “Mary” who was the sister of Lazarus, and the woman of Samaria—and secondly by a process of polarization of her states of sin and repentance. She is made not merely a sinner, but a prostitute, not just a repentant disciple, but a saint. From a practitioner of the oldest profession, she rises to be no less than the “beata dilectrix” of Christ. In medieval literature she and Christ address each other as “love,” “true love,” and “lover.” She is the most important figure at the tomb of Christ (in the Coventry Resurrection play costumes were provided for Magdalen and for “two side Maries”), and was the first witness of the Resurrection. Her tears were symbolic of the purifying waters of baptism. Her hold on dramatists, ballad writers, and artists can be well understood.

One other aspect of her legend bears on the parallel imagery of Ophelia, and that is the threefold interpretation of her relationship with God. God for Magdalen is father, lover, and brother—all as manifestations of the same divine love. In the ballad “The Maid and the Palmer” an old man—the figure of the Father—appears to the woman at the well, identified in medieval tradition as Magdalen. She hopes he is “the good old man / That all the world beleeves vpon.” In a Scandinavian version of the ballad, it is Jesus who appears in the pilgrim's robe. Magdalen's Christ/brother is Lazarus, whose raising from the dead prefigured the Resurrection, and Ophelia's brother at one stage briefly enacts this. In the deeply symbolic graveyard scene in Hamlet, with a setting redolent of the Last Judgment plays in the mystery cycles, Laertes leaps into his sister's open grave and then emerges from it.
The young woman in the known sources of the Hamlet story has neither father nor brother; the provision of both in Shakespeare's play opens the way for the multiple imagery of the threefold relationship in Ophelia's mad scene.

Three religious plays—the Digby Mary Magdalene, Wager's morality play The Life and Repentance of Marie Magdalene, and the Benediktbeuern Passion play—are convenient texts from which to trace parallels with Shakespeare's heroine. Shakespeare may not have known the plays, but the legends were common knowledge, and the plays contain many of them. In the main, the following parallels are traced through the Digby play, which has been dated late fifteenth or early sixteenth century. The play begins with an affectionate family scene between Magdalen, her sister Martha, her father Cyrus, and her brother Lazarus. The family is about to be scattered, as Cyrus divides his estates between his children. It can be seen that although the topic of conversation is different from Hamlet I.iii, there is some similarity in the characters present and in the occasion. After leaving her home, Magdalen is led to an inn by Luxuria, and is seduced by Curiosity, who gets the better of her, so to speak. Curiosity's conversation with her, in a tone of mock gallantry mixed with indecency, is reminiscent of the cruel banter with which Hamlet assails Ophelia in the play scene. In Wager's play there is a similar conversation between Magdalen and Infidelitie, the Vice. It is interesting to see Hamlet so nearly assuming the role of vice, or villain, in this instance.

The seduction in Hamlet is described in Ophelia's "valentine" song. In the Digby play, Magdalen becomes a prostitute and is seen in her "erbyr" waiting for her "valentynys"—"A, God be wyth my valentynys, / My byrd swetyng, my lovys so dere!" (ll. 564-65). In the Wager play she decks herself in elaborate costumes and jewels, and is persuaded to buy cosmetics to paint her face. In the Benediktbeuern play, she visits a shop with her fellow prostitutes to buy cosmetics. Hamlet in the nunnery scene adopts the tone of a contemporary preacher rebuking the painted ladies of the town: "I have heard of your paintings too, well enough; God hath given you one face, and you make yourselves another; you jig, you amble, and you lisp, and you nickname God's creatures …" (III.i.145-48). The "sweet ladies" to whom Ophelia later bids goodnight, the coach for which she calls, are part of this life in gaudio.

In the mad scene Ophelia is acting out, among other facets of the tragedy, the role of harlot which Hamlet has foisted on her. To the king she suddenly says, "They say the owl was a baker's daughter." This is perhaps the only direct reference to a legend almost certainly linked with Magdalen. According to a country legend cited by Douce, Jesus asked for bread at a baker's shop; the girl in the shop cheated him, and he punished her by changing her into an owl. This is typical of many New Testament apocryphal stories, in which the character of Jesus is made stern and retributive to sinners. The outline of the story is similar to that of the ballad "The Maid and the Palmer." There an old man asked for water at a well. The girl at the well refused him, and he punished her by changing her first to a stepping stone and then to a bell-clapper, and lastly by sending her to hell for seven years. The ballad tells one of the stories of Magdalen and Jesus which grew up after identification of Magdalen with the woman of Samaria. The owl and the baker's daughter may have derived from stories of St. Mary of Egypt, who was always depicted with loaves of bread, and was often confused with Magdalen.

The Digby Magdalen described herself when a prostitute as "drynchyn" (drowned) "in synne" (l. 754). In her death Ophelia re-enacts this drowning in sin; the "long purples," which some critics have found so incongruous in the Queen's speech describing the drowning, can be seen as the key to this re-enactment.

The waters that meet over Magdalen's head are those of baptism, and she emerges repentant. In token of her changed condition, she sheds her jewels and dresses in black. Later she will assume the appearance of the Donatello Magdalen, her hair dishevelled, her face drawn, her clothing in rags. Early in the nunnery scene, Ophelia returns to Hamlet the "rich gifts," "remembrances of yours," which he had given her. There is no reference to her appearance in the mad scene, except for the Q.1 stage direction ("Enter Ofelia playing on a Lute, and her haire downe singing"), but traditionally she assumes the disorder of the penitent's hair and dress,
which is equally indicative of mental derangement. It is worth noting, because other similar instances will emerge, that the “nighted colour” of mourning which Hamlet wears is also the outward show of repentance; Hamlet is, in a sense, wearing Magdalen's color when he confronts Ophelia.

The central scene of the Magdalen story is the Resurrection. She first visits the sepulchre with the two “side” Maries, bearing herbs and spices to anoint the dead body of Jesus. They find the tomb empty and are told by an angel that Christ is risen. Left alone, Magdalene is the first person to see the risen Christ. This scene, described in the gospels with some variations, is also the subject of the first recognizably dramatic ceremony in the liturgy—“Quem quaeritis in sepulchro,” “whom seek ye in the sepulchre?” to which the angel adds, “He is risen, he is not here” (“non est hic, surrexit”). This scene is linked in Magdalen legend with a passage from The Song of Solomon, for Magdalen, the beata dilectrix of Christ and sister of Lazarus the Christ-figure, was identified with the sister/spouse of the Old Testament: “I will … seke him that my soule loueth; I soght him, but I founde him not. / The watchemen that went about the citie founde me; to whome I said, Haue you sene him whome my soule loueth?”

It takes little imagination to see that from this line one could continue directly with the first line of Ophelia's song—“How should I your true love know?”—which like Raleigh's “As you came from the Holy Land,” seems to start from an old ballad about a pilgrimage to Walsingham, but finishes in the poet's own idiom. Since Magdalen traditionally calls Jesus her love, the song which (with interruptions) runs through the mad scene can be seen as the negative Quem quaeritis of an evil, disordered world. Parts of the song, including the opening lines, are missing; it is jumbled and broken up, and spoken by various persons who are not identified. But the answer to the seeker's question is clear: the true love, or Father, or brother, is dead, not risen; “he will not come again.” The lines beginning “And will a not come again?” are full of negative-resounding doom—not, not, no, no, never—and give the counsel of despair, “Go to thy death-bed.”

The true love is to be recognized “by his cockle hat and staff / And his sandal shoon”—the pilgrim's dress worn by the risen Christ on the road to Emmaus, and by the man at the well in “The Maid and the Palmer.” The pilgrim is buried, “At his heels a stone”—an indication that he is not in a grave, where the stone would be at the head, but in a sepulchre sealed by a stone. The “O, ho!” which follows this line is the mourner's cry of grief, as Magdalen wept over her brother Lazarus and at the sepulchre of Christ. The white shroud of the martyr is “Larded all with sweet flowers,” the equivalent of the herbs and spices that Magdalen brought to the tomb. The faulty rhythm of “Which bewept to the grave did not go” points the intrusive not; this body was not destined for the grave. The “true love showers” are the tears of the mourner (cf. Richard II, V.i.20: “And wash him fresh again with true-love tears”); Magdalen's tears are among the most famous ever shed. But Shakespeare is always alive to a double meaning, and “showers” are also pangs, the bitter pains felt by the “true love.” In the Digby play Lazarus exclaims, “A! A, now brystyt myn hartt! þis is a sharp showyr!” (l. 822), and the word was in use in this meaning as late as 1637. The first part of the song ends, and Ophelia, after greeting the king, says, “they say the owl was a baker's daughter.”

The lament over the dead love begins again with “They bore him barefaced on the bier.” The “hey non nonny” line which follows is not in Q.2 and looks like an interpolation. The many tears again recall the copious water which flowed from Magdalen's eyes. The figure in the last verse is that of the father—indeed, of the Ancient of Days: “His beard was as white as snow, / All flaxen was his poll” (cf. Daniel 7.9: “the Ancient of daies did sit, whose garment was white as snowe, and the heere of his head like the pure woll”). The earthly father dead, and the earthly brother who has gone away, are mourned by Ophelia in her visionary state as Magdalen mourned Jesus, who was at once the heavenly Father and her “true love,” and also Lazarus, her brother who was a type of Christ. Thus it is not, in this strangely haunting scene, a particular death and absence which is lamented; it is the death of Ophelia's whole world, and she symbolizes this also with the flowers which she scatters among the assembled company. They are funeral flowers, handed to those who will shortly die—the King, the Queen, Laertes, and herself.
The legends of Magdalen's later life describe her as a preacher, converting the heathen, and as a hermit in the wilderness, where she is fed by angels until her death and ascent to heaven. In a long poem published at Lyon in 1668, Magdalen is described as preaching to her former fellow-prostitutes and exhorting them to enter nunneries. With no earlier reference, this cannot be directly related to Hamlet's repeated exhortations to Ophelia to “get thee to a nunnery,” but it is at least likely that the Magdalen of legend would do this, as the patron saint of reformed prostitutes and as a preacher. If so, Hamlet in the nunnery scene is opposing the repentant Magdalen to the figure of her former self which he sees in Ophelia. He not only wears Magdalen's “nighted colour” but also speaks her words.

In the death of Ophelia, borne down the weeping brook, the main image is of another suffering innocent, the Fair Maid of Astolat, who floated down the Thames. This story from Malory may also have influenced the funeral scene, for it is the King (Arthur) who commands arrangements for the funeral, and the ceremony is attended by the Fair Maid's “true love” (Lancelot) and brother (Lavaine). These images may testify to the “embryology” (to use T.S. Eliot's word) of the episodes of the drowning and of the funeral rather than to their meaning; but it may be worth noting that Claudius's “arrangements” for Ophelia's funeral are the reverse of what they seem. According to the Clowns, Ophelia killed herself, and only by “great command” was she allowed Christian burial; even so, only “maimed rites” were permitted. Yet it is clear from the Queen's description that Ophelia did not deliberately throw herself into the water; it appears that although the Queen knew well enough what happened, different information was given to the “crowners,” which deprived her of the benefit of the full funeral service. It is Claudius who has “maimed” the rites, not for the first time, as Polonius her father was interred “hugger-mugger”; and his action aligns Ophelia's funeral with the hasty burial of Christ, leading in turn to Magdalen's visit to the tomb with herbs and spices.

The stage properties which accompany Ophelia are, significantly, specified in the text. The traditional symbol of Magdalen's contempt of the world, the skull, is thrown from Ophelia's grave early in the funeral scene, and lies nearby as her body is prepared for burial. Earlier, in the nunnery scene, she carried a book, the symbol of Magdalen the contemplative. The flowers in the mad scene may be taken to stand for the funeral herbs and spices which Magdalen carries in her traditional ointment jar. The rue, which she probably hands to the King since it must be worn “with a difference” (that is, with a sign that he is not in the main line of succession), is also the “herb of grace,” a phrase as relevant in this context as the “long purples” are to the drowning.

In tracing religious imagery in Hamlet, it is instructive to compare it with Der Bestrafte Brudermord, a corrupt German version of Shakespeare's play in which all religious reference is omitted. Thus in Ophelia's part, there is no scene with her father and brother; no account of her confrontation by Hamlet in her closet; no book or skull; no drowning (she commits suicide by throwing herself from the top of a hill); her mad scenes are utterly secular nonsense, and there is no graveyard scene. The Magdalen imagery changes all this. As has been noted above, the drowning is parallel to the “drowning in sin” of the early Magdalen, and the water to which Ophelia is as “native and indued” is reminiscent both of the tears shed over the feet of Christ and of the redemptive waters of baptism; water is as much part of Ophelia's story as it is of Magdalen's. Laertes, Ophelia's commentator in this as in the mad scene, evokes the saint-like figure that she is to be, the fair and unpolluted flesh in earth, the “minist'ring angel” in heaven. The idea of ophelia, succor, is implicit in “minist'ring.”

Like Cassandra, like Iphigenia, Ophelia suffers for the sins of the house. Johnson's famous comment can therefore be seen in an unusual light: “the gratification which would arise from the destruction of an usurper and a murderer is abated by the untimely death of Ophelia, the young, the beautiful, the harmless, and the pious.” The devout Johnson would undoubtedly have been shocked at the suggestion that the untimely death of Christ robs us of any gratification arising from the defeat of Satan; but without the idea of atonement, the power of Ophelia's tragedy cannot be fully grasped. In her mad scene she mourns the loss and absence which has doomed the court of Denmark, polluted by lust and murder. “Where,” she asks, “is the beauteous majesty of Denmark?” Where, indeed? Her words echo the transferred epithet of Horatio's lines in the first scene of
the play, “What art thou, that usurp'st this time of night, / Together with that fair and warlike form / In which the majesty of buried Denmark / Did sometimes march?” Ophelia's death is the signal for the retributive action which at last is taken when her beloved brother unwittingly provides the poisoned weapon for Hamlet's hand.

As Ophelia is not the double character of the legendary Magdalen, but only the purer half, the other half being painted in by false accusation, why should Shakespeare choose the image of Magdalen to illumine the role of Ophelia? The popular appeal of Magdalen is that she epitomizes hope. She sins, she repents; she is forgiven, and by grace she is made pure. She is therefore the hope of every sinner. For Hamlet, “all is not well,” “how ill all's here about my heart”; but Ophelia says “I hope all will be well.” The Magdalen raised from prostitution to sainthood provides a resolution of the Una/Fidessa riddle. The sin in Magdalen could be atoned for, sinner and penitent made one and purified. Ophelia acts this atonement through the scenes of Magdalen's life. Hamlet speaks of the ghost as a hellish resurrection, out of the “ponderous and marble jaws” of his father's sepulchre, “making night hideous”; Ophelia evokes the heavenly resurrection in the search for her “true love.”

The idea of atonement (adunamentum) brings us back to Spenser's Una, who like Ophelia is the face of true purity. With his “Una,” Hamlet might have reached the Castle of Holiness; he rejects the woman who could have been his “swete sokor”—the phrase used of Magdalen by her grateful disciples in the Digby play (1. 1963). Laertes gives the key lines on his sister: “O Rose of May, / Dear maid, kind sister, sweet Ophelia.” The rose of May is probably the white rose, the symbol of both the Virgin and Magdalen, whose tears were supposed to have washed it white. The “dear maid” is a virgin, pure in spite of all Hamlet's suspicions; the “kind sister” is in contrast to the incestuous and therefore unnatural (unkind) sister-in-law of Claudius; and “sweet Ophelia” is a version of “swete sokor.”

To go back to woman's nature as described by Euripides, Ophelia could have given to Hamlet the means of salvation, ophelian megistan; but he is fatally convinced that she brings him only the greatest harm. Nothing could be more decisive than his rejection; he first abuses her, and then forgets her. Her living image is only fleetingly recalled in the funeral scene, and the last reference to her in the play is Hamlet's half-mocking challenge which brings his rejection of her to its conclusion: “Be buried quick with her, and so will I.”

Notes

1. Book I.vii.1; note also Book IV.i.17 (the theme runs through much of The Faerie Queene). Citations are to The Works of Edmund Spenser: Variorum Edition.
2. August Nauck, ed., Tragicorum Graecorum Fragmenta (Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1964), p. 384 (Stob. Flor. LXIX.7). This Stobaic fragment is taken from a lost play by Euripides on Alcmaeon. Editions of the fragments of ancient Greek collected by Stobaeus were published, in Greek and in Latin, at various times through the sixteenth century, and it is possible that Shakespeare had some knowledge of them, as F.P. Wilson suggested (in Shakespeare's Reading, quoted by Emrys Jones, The Origins of Shakespeare [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977], p. 91). For discussion of the possible link between Hamlet and the story of Alcmaeon, see my chap. IV, in Shakespeare's Play within Play: Medieval Imagery and Scenic Form in Hamlet, Othello, and King Lear, Western Michigan University, Medieval Institute Publications, 1990. J. P. Collier lists a play on Alcmaeon (now lost) given in the court revels before Elizabeth (The History of English Dramatic Poetry to the Time of Shakespeare [London, 1831], III, 24). See also ibid., I, 207. Either at second hand from this play or directly from Stobaeus, Shakespeare might have come across the word which named his heroine.
4. Q2. The emphasis is changed in F1—“snatches of old tunes.”
5. Faerie Queene I.ii.40, I.ix.21.
6. *Julius Caesar* V.iii.69; cf. *Faerie Queene* I.i.25.
7. In his own eyes, at least; *vide* “As kill a king and marry with his brother” (III.iv.29).
10. See the Digby Mary Magdalen play, in *The Late Medieval Religious Plays of Bodleian MSS Digby 133 and e Museo 160*, ed. Donald Baker, John L. Murphy, and Louis B. Hall, Jr., EETS, 283 (1982): l. 1068 (“I his lover”), l. 1588 (“mary my lover”); and the version of *Noli me tangere* in the York Winedrawers' play: “negh me not, my loue, latte be” (l. 82). For the York plays, see the edition of Richard Beadle (London: Edward Arnold, 1982).
17. The connotation of “long purples” is most explicit in Q2 (IV.vii.170), for which most editors substitute the F1 version: “But our cull-cold maydes doe dead mens fingers call them.”
19. Cf. Dover Wilson's stage direction: “she takes jewels from her bosom and places them on the table before him” (p. 61).
23. “Hey nonny nonny” and, later, “down-a-down,” both common phrases in ballad refrains, may indicate the disorder and parody of her song. Cf. Wager's opening lines, spoken by Infidelitie: “With heigh down down and downe a downe a, / Saluator mundi Domine, Kyrieleyson, / Ite, Missa est, With pipe vp Alleluya.”
25. The Order for reformed prostitutes (Pénitent de Sainte Marie-Madeleine), known as *Dames blanches* or *Weissfrauen* because they were dressed in white, was first set up in the early thirteenth century; see Victor Saxer, *Le Culte de Marie Madeleine en Occident* (Auxerre: Société des fouilles archéologiques et des monuments historiques d'Yonne, 1959), pp. 222-23.
28. Cf. *Much Ado about Nothing* I.i.69: “If he have wit enough to keep himself warm, let him bear it for a difference between himself and his horse.” Of course, the real “difference” between Ophelia and the King is between the pure and impure.
In a short preliminary paper\footnote{MYTH} I sought to establish the presence in Hamlet of the traditional symbol of the Cup of Sovereignty. Briefly the argument was this: when Hamlet speaks of the ‘dram of evil’ that obscures a man’s virtues (I. iv. 36-8), he is constructing a metaphor for the cup Claudius drinks out of to celebrate his marriage, and giving this vessel connotations which, on the moral plane, resemble those found in the several poisons used in the play: moral corruption is as inherent in that cup as physical infection is in Lucianus’, Laertes’, or Claudius’ poisons. The significance placed on this cup seems out of all proportion to its apparent function in the play, until we stop looking for a realistic explanation and recall that the cup was a symbol for the transmission of Sovereignty in Celtic tales: when the queen handed a vessel or otherwise offered drink to the hero she was granting him her sexual favours and/or sovereignty over her territory. No reader of Hamlet can fail to notice the analogy with Claudius’ cup in I. iv which symbolizes both his sexual union with Gertrude and his accession to the Danish throne. The argument, then, claims a traditional, non-realistic reading for this aspect of the play. The present article seeks to delve further into the mythological status of Gertrude and, beyond this, to explore the role, and the fate, of myth in Hamlet."

In the following essay, Aguirre examines the symbol of the cup from which Gertrude drinks in the play’s final scene, and attempts to “delve further into the mythological status of Gertrude and, beyond this, to explore the role, and the fate, of myth in Hamlet.”


1. MYTH

Though more research has been done into the Celtic—especially Irish—manifestations of the theme of Sovereignty,\footnote{Sources} this theme is equally widespread in Greek and Germanic myth; according to the twelfth century scholar Snorri Sturluson, the function of the Valkyries was to serve the sacred mead in Val-hall;\footnote{Snorri Sturluson} Brynhild’s acceptance of Sigurd was signalled by the rune-cup she handed him after he woke her up on her
flame-encircled mountain; in canto x of *The Odyssey* Circe offered Odysseus' men a bowl containing food and wine mixed with a drug that enslaved their minds and bodies to her will. In all three cases the vessel is a token of acceptance or rejection, of love or death. A variation on this symbol appears in the tale of Hamlet's precursor, the hero Amleth whose exploits Saxo Grammaticus relates in his *Historia*. He was sent to England with two devious friends bearing orders for his execution; once in England, all three were invited by the king to a feast at which Amleth abstained from eating and drinking; when asked why he had refrained from it all ‘as if it were poison’, he replied that the bread, meat, and drink were tainted with human blood, human flesh, and iron rust. As a result of these revelations (which turned out to be true, thus proclaiming his more-than-human wisdom), Amleth obtained the hand of the king's daughter and the execution of his treacherous friends. Symbolically, the feast was a test which his companions (like Odysseus' men before Circe's drink) failed, but which Amleth (like Odysseus) passed. Loss of life or loss of humanity is the penalty; the lady's favour, and Sovereignty, the reward.

The cup is not the only symbol relevant to an understanding of Hamlet; there is also the symbolism of water, which traditional myth again significantly relates to the figure of an Otherworld woman. The Irish Cuchulainn crosses the sea in search of the sorceress Scathach, who will either kill him or teach him the craft of arms; eventually she gives him her own daughter. The Welsh Macsen journeys from Rome to Anglesey to meet the lady of his dream, Elen of the Hosts; she will eventually help him to reconquer Rome. The Irish Conle, Bran, and Mael Duin all put to sea to reach the Island of Women, where love and immortality await them. Like the Celtic fairy women, Circe, Calypso, Nausicaa, and Penelope all live on islands towards which Odysseus must sail. On reaching the Rubicon, Caesar sees a vision of Rome personified as a mighty woman who mourns the coming civil war and begs him not to cross the river. When Thomas Rymer was led to Elfland by a fairy queen,

*He wade thro red blude to the knee,*  
*And he saw neither sun nor moon,*  
*But heard the roaring of the sea.* (10)

Having sailed to England, Saxo's Amleth will marry the English king's daughter; when Shakespeare's Hamlet is sent to England he undergoes a change (similar to that mysterious 'seachange' which is the essence of *The Tempest*) and returns a new man to Denmark—to witness (and here lies a fundamental difference) the burial of his lady and, shortly after, the death of the Queen. Time and again, in Celtic, Germanic, and classical myth, the hero's encounter with Woman, whether Queen, Goddess, Fairy, or Sorceress, is made dependent on his crossing a sea or river - a voyage at the end of which she awaits in majesty to bestow or withhold Sovereignty, or else to subjugate or destroy him.

Woman is also the Spinner, the Great Weaver, the Embroiderer. As the Greek Moirai and the Roman Parcae, she spins, measures, and cuts the threads of human destinies; as the Queen of the Island of Women, she retains Mael Duin with a magic ball of yarn which cleaves to his palm; as Ariadne, she gives Theseus the thread that will allow him to extricate himself from the Labyrinth; as Clytemnestra, she casts a net over her husband Agamemnon so that he will be helpless before the sword of her lover Aegisthus; as Bertilak's wife, she gives Gawain a magic girdle to protect himself from the Green Knight's blow; as the giantess Grid she lends Thor a girdle of might to fight Geirrod the giant. As Queen Gerutha in Saxo's tale, she spends a year knitting a vast hanging to cover the walls of her palace; at the end of the year, as a banquet is held in honour of dead Amleth, the hero returns from England to everyone's confusion. He puts on a wild disposition, takes up the office of drink-bearer and plies everyone with drink; but when they are all drunk asleep he cuts down his mother's hanging to immobilize the sleepers on the floor, and burns the hall down on them. As both Gerutha and Gertrude, she hides a spying courtier behind an arras (under a quilt in Saxo's and Belleforest's versions), which will result in his death at the hands of her son; 'I took thee for thy better', says Hamlet; and 'It had been so with us, had we been there’, confirms Claudius.
And indeed, Polonius is a surrogate-king, a stand-in for his better, King Claudius, and dies a king's death—Agamemnon's. Time and again myths metaphorize fate as the operations of a Woman who spins, knits, weaves, or embroiders men's destinies; for whom yarns, webs, nets, and hangings are instruments to entangle, protect, or extricate the seeker. Hamlet displays the same metaphors in a conspicuous manner.

So cup, sea-voyage, and yarn or web or cloth are all symbols central to the tale of the meeting between the hero and Sovereignty. Their presence is amply evident in Saxo's story; I think I have shown that all three are present in Shakespeare's, if under certain important modifications. Let me now formulate the idea as it applies to Shakespeare's text: the cup is Gertrude's, not Claudius'; the Danish crown was not his to take, it was hers to give; she it was who yielded Sovereignty to him; and Claudius' own explanation of the event is hollow: he could not have wedded Gertrude to save the unsettled orphan country because that decision was not for him to make.

2. GERTRUDE

Several questions arise directly from the foregoing: (a) what is Gertrude's status? (b) why did Gertrude give Sovereignty to Claudius? And (c) that most vexed question: has the Queen committed adultery?

To answer the first: Claudius refers to Gertrude in 1. ii. 9 as ‘Th’ imperial jointress to this warlike state’; Jenkins has pointed out that

From the reference to the Queen as ‘jointress’ Dover Wilson infers that Gertrude had a life-interest in the crown, and it may be that Shakespeare had in mind how in earlier versions of the story Hamlet's father acquired the throne by marriage; but the rights he accords Gertrude as dowager he is content not to define. What is clear is that Claudius became king before taking her ‘to wife’ but consolidated his position by a prudent marriage.

Actually it is not that simple. First, as to earlier versions of the story: Saxo tells us that King Rorik of Denmark had appointed Amleth's father, Horwendil, ruler of Jutland jointly with his brother Feng. Horwendil ‘held the monarchy for three years, and then, to win the height of glory, devoted himself to roving’. We may presume that, meanwhile, Feng stayed on as king, though Saxo does not tell us. Then Horwendil slew King Koll, married Rorik's daughter Gerutha, and was slain by Feng, who then wedded his brother's widow. Belleforest adds that Fengon killed his brother ‘craignant d'estre depossede de sa part du gouvernement, ou plustost desirant destre seul en la principaute’; clearly, his Fengon had remained king all along while Horwendil lived as a rover, and feared eviction once Horwendil returned. Both brothers, therefore, were rulers before they married Gerutha. Jenkins's statement that Hamlet's father obtained the throne through marriage in earlier versions does not agree with the story as told by Saxo and Belleforest.

And yet: it is not easy to dispel the impression that their wedding does have something to do with their status as rulers. It is a matter of immediacy: sexual union or sexual harassment of women are mentioned immediately before or after the death of a ruler, or in explicit juxtaposition to kingship. Both Saxo and Belleforest make the point that Feng/Fengon's first concern after killing his brother was to marry his widow; Belleforest furthermore states that Fengon wedded ‘celle qu'il entretenoit execrablement, durant la vie du bon Horvvendille’: he had already had sexual relations with her before her husband's death. Saxo then tells us that when Wiglek succeeded Rorik his first move was to harass Amleth's mother, why, we are not told; further we learn that as soon as Amleth had been slain by Wiglek his widow Hermutrude, again for no reason one can discern, ‘yielded herself up unasked to be the conqueror's spoil and bride’. All of this goes beyond mere coincidence: while there is nowhere an indication to the effect that marriage is a precondition for kingship, time after time we encounter an inevitable link between sexual union and sovereignty. The terse grammar of myth employs a paratactic structure giving us little more than concomitancy; any connectives between the three events (death, enthronement, sexual union) we have to make up, but significance is of the essence.
If we read Gertrude's marriage as a sequel to Claudius' coronation, we assign a very poor role to her: she becomes a helpless victim of circumstances; she loses a husband, then a new king is elected with little regard for her possible interest in the state as ‘jointress’, then she is seduced by the new king, who finally weds her for political reasons. It is doubtlessly part of the playwright's intention to present her in this light …, yet there is more to Gertrude in the text. Something of the paratactic grammar of myth has rubbed off on Shakespeare. Laertes tells Claudius that he is there ‘to show my duty in your coronation'; Horatio tells Hamlet he came ‘to see your father's funeral'; Hamlet replies sarcastically it must have been ‘to see my mother's wedding’. All three statements are found in the same scene (I. ii). We are not told which of the three events came first, which last, though we infer from Claudius' speech in I. ii. 1 ff. that the wedding has just taken place. On this same critical day Hamlet mourns his father's death ‘But two months dead—nay, not so much, not two’; seven lines later: ‘within a month'; his pain makes his reckoning of time unreliable, but if it is Gertrude's wedding that, as Claudius seems to imply, has taken place on this day, when did the coronation take place? If some time before the wedding, why is Laertes still in Elsinore, seeing that he only came for the coronation? If Horatio came to see the funeral, and ‘has been a month and more in Denmark, Hamlet would have been likely to know of his presence': yet the latter greets him as if they had not seen each other all this time—in fact, as if the funeral had only taken place yesterday (which is what a grief-stricken Hamlet feels, anyway). Judging from each of the three statements by Laertes, Horatio, and Hamlet, we feel they all bear the same immediacy to the present. My argument is that reading the three events in temporal succession yields serious inconsistencies, and that this is not simply the result of carelessness on Shakespeare's part but arises from a conflict between a modern perspective and a traditional theme. The modern view seeks linearity, temporal order, causality; the traditional theme involves concomitancy, simultaneity, significance. This is most clearly brought home by Old Hamlet in I. v. 74ff.: ‘Thus was I, sleeping, by a brother's hand,| Of life, of crown, of queen at once dispatch’d'. At once, indeed: for the queen is the life is the crown. Again, consider the following exchange (I. v. 39ff.):

The main statement in this five-line outburst is ‘Ay, that beast won the will of my queen’. Now this statement has nothing to do with the ostensive meaning of the Ghost's previous lines: he was trying to reveal his murderer to Hamlet, suddenly he raves off extempore about how this murderer has seduced Gertrude. ‘Ay’ is meant to confirm Hamlet's exclamation ‘My uncle!', and thus to identify the killer; since this ‘Ay’ is followed by a comma, it introduces what should by rights contribute to the identification; a string of epithets would do; but when they emerge they become the subject of a new sentence, one which does not confirm anything said before but moves on to a different track, yielding a logically incongruous sequence which could be summarized as follows:

Incongruous, indeed: unless the Queen's will does have a relevance to life and crown.

3. THE QUEEN'S WILL

For us it would be a simple matter to read here that the Queen is guilty, or at least hopelessly weak; that she has conspired or connived in the King's murder; that, being of a fickle will, she has let herself be seduced, and proven frail and inconstant, if not treacherous. For the more traditional, mythical mind, on the other hand, the
Queen simply exercises a prerogative, and it is her deliberate choice that results in a king's death and another man's enthronement: the Queen is indeed the life is the crown. Now, Shakespeare's text stands half-way between these two readings; it contains a persistent if subdued association of the Queen with 'life and crown' as well as several important ingredients of the traditional theme of Sovereignty, but for Hamlet they are no longer intelligible, even though he, like Claudius, dimly recognizes their import. And so he is outraged by his mother's deed, a deed which he, like ourselves, must interpret in a 'realistic' way and therefore without the framework of myth to justify it.

Nor is this such a far-fetched notion. Our contemporary, ‘post-modernist’ literature is currently dealing with its exact opposite: for it exploits our absolute faith in realism and startles or thrills us with the sight of a character caught out of his reality: we feel puzzled or amused when an author intrudes into the story to tell his creation what's what, when the immutable frame of reality-in-the-novel breaks down and characters become suddenly conscious of their fictional status. But what happens when a creature of myth comes, quite possibly in spite of himself, to believe in a reality divested of symbolic qualities? What should we say of a character who gets trapped into a pitilessly real space and becomes unable to explain his world because he no longer has the wider reference framework of myth to validate it? Elsewhere I have used the expression ‘the closure of the world’ to identify the process whereby an increasing realism shuts the Renaissance culture against the world of the non-rational, the world of Numens, archetypes, and myths, with the resulting loss of meaning for the inhabitants of the human world. Hamlet, one such victim of this closure, vainly tries to understand by means of reason what is in effect a mythical deed; he rejects much that goes on in Elsinore; but most he rages at his mother's choice. With ‘a scholar's tongue’ he runs through all the human faculties, senses, and emotions which might have been responsible for Gertrude's inexplicable act; he concludes that the operations of memory, love, judgement, sense, and shame must have been suspended at the time; even reason must have been perverted, for 'reason panders will'. This, an incomprehensible will which he can only see as perverse, is all that remains after such an analysis.

And the will is the key to the problem. In the context, the word will may signify sexual desire, or passion generally, but it cannot be reduced to either; the word is contrasted with 'conscience', 'thought' (III. i), 'reflection', 'reason' (III. iv): a contrast central not only to Hamlet but also to a proper understanding of the Renaissance. Medieval Christianity had always emphasized the will, whether in a literature of action or in its religious concern with free will. On the other hand, ever since the Renaissance our culture has stressed consciousness, while placing a lavish emphasis upon the evils of the will. The myths of Faustus and Don Juan, of Macbeth and Satan, Don Quixote's rashness and Hamlet's indecision, all point to a new understanding of the will as an evil or ineffective faculty whose operations are to be mistrusted. The rise of Elizabethan drama and the birth of the picaresque novel signal a new type of writing which stresses the ubiquitousness of deception, the importance of mistrust, the need to reflect before acting. The modernity breeds a literature of reflection in which the world is no longer the known arena where the central question was whether to follow one or the other of two well-understood courses of action; but a bewildering realm where the question is rather whether to act at all, given our uncertainty about the motives, means, and outcome of action.

As the Queen carries out her one mythical deed, on which the whole play depends, the new hero ponders its import, agonizes over his own response, and endlessly reflects about motives and consequences; in his eyes her will becomes an evil faculty unchecked by reflection. Her choice of consort should be understood in symbolic terms—but a 'realist' son finds it meaningless and outrageous; it should be seen as a manifestation of the theme of Sovereignty—but without the dignity of myth, it becomes a mere case of adultery.

4. ADULTERY

Do not weep, kind cuckold, take comfort, man, thy betters have been beccos: Agamemnon Emperor of all the merry Greeks, that tickled all the true Troyans, was a cornuto; Prince Arthur, that cut off twelve kings' beards, was a cornuto; Hercules, whose back bore up
heaven, and got forty wenches with child in one night … yet was a cornuto.

(Marston, *The Malcontent*, IV. v. 54ff.)

This is the ‘realist’, cynical view; unwittingly, however, it once again looks back to myths. All three heroes mentioned by Marston perished as a result of their wives’ infidelity or involvement with another man. Both Agamemnon and Hercules died much like Polonius when covered with a fateful piece of clothing (net, shirt) woven by their wives. As for Arthur, we learn from Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *History* that, ‘at the beginning of August’, he left for Rome, delegating ‘the task of defending Britain to his nephew Mordred and to his Queen, Guinevere’. A year later, ‘when summer came’, he learned ‘that his nephew Mordred, in whose care he had left Britain, had placed the crown upon his own head. What is more, this treacherous tyrant was living adulterously and out of wedlock with Queen Guinevere, who had broken the vows of her earlier marriage’. The resemblance to Hamlet is noteworthy; but here the presence of myth is much more obvious. The summer king leaves, a new summer comes; usurpation of kingship is simultaneous with usurpation of the king’s marital rights. Geoffrey, of course, lays part of the blame on Guinevere, like his contemporary Saxo does on Queen Hermutrude: woman is inconstant. But both authors preserve glimpses of an older tradition, and other myths allow us to uncover its pattern. King Cormac dreamt that his wife Ethne slept with Eochu Gunnat, after which she went back to her husband; when asking his druid for an interpretation, he was told: ‘thy kingship will sleep with him, and he will be but one year in the kingship of Tara’. Blodeuwedd and her lover planned to slay her husband, the Welsh hero Lleu Llaw Gyffes; but he could only be killed by a spear forged ‘in a year of Sundays’; and so Lleu was struck down exactly one year after the plan was conceived. The death of the year equates the death of the husband; either event signals (or is signalled by) the Queen’s or Lady’s attachment to another man.

The drift of my argument is that we have to do with ritual. I do not mean this in any anthropological sense, the sort of ritual at which, as Robert Graves tells us, the Queen rid herself of a Yearly or Half-Yearly King in a bloody sacrifice. Rather I mean mythic, ultimately literary ritual. From the point of view of literary analysis, the entire concept of Sovereignty and its transmission must be seen as a stupendous metaphor devised to convey the basic rhythm of earth and seasons. The metaphor is presented in a variety of images centred around Woman which include the Voyage, the Test, the Cup, the Yarn or Net or woven garment; abduction, hierogamy, and adultery; deliverance and bondage; betrayal, death, and renewal. It is because these are all metaphors for a sacred round—it is because they are transcendent images—that they are used by traditional cultures. The general principle, of which adultery constitutes a special case, is renewal, and in the mythic heart of medieval Europe this principle is still strong enough to assert itself from behind the growing realism of its literature.

And so when we come to the Renaissance we find the theme of Sovereignty still very much a literary issue; but instead of asserting the theme, the literature of the new age questions it, literalizes and plays down its mythic import. In the metaphor of earth and seasons, woman was nature and her behaviour was therefore predictable in a mythic, cyclic—as opposed to linear—view of time. Take this myth away, and woman’s behaviour will appear incomprehensible and therefore perverse; it is then but inevitable that this perversion should attach to the metaphor itself, to all female symbols of nature. At this point, Laertes’ speech on learning of Ophelia's death sums up the whole issue:

Too much of water hast thou, poor Ophelia,
And therefore I forbid my tears; but yet
It is our trick; nature her custom holds,
Let shame say what it will. When these are gone,
The woman will be out. Adieu, my lord,
I have a speech o' fire that fain would blaze
But that this folly drowns it.
The concepts Laertes is contrasting can be summarized thus:

Man shame (honour) fire blazing speech

Woman nature tears, water drowning folly

‘The woman will be out.’ This is the unconscious goal towards which the new culture strives: the eradication of the significant presence of the feminine principle from the Western definition of the universe. She is water that has to be opposed with fire; she is folly that has to be mastered with that most rational faculty, speech; she is shameless nature that has to be restrained by a manly sense of honour; she stands for myth that must be replaced with a realistic view of things. But she is also strong: too strong for the patriarchal culture to destroy her; she may be outrageously unintelligible, but her folly can yet drown a speech of fire. The only way to defeat her age-old power is to get the imagery to shortcircuit itself, as it were: the metaphor implodes, and Woman drowns in the very water she symbolized; it implodes again, and she dies of the very drink that was her most sacred prerogative. With the deaths of Ophelia and, especially, Gertrude, the traditional concept of Sovereignty passes from woman's hands, and a decisive step is taken towards the Modernity.

To conclude, then, Hamlet does not just express the new point of view concerning woman's Sovereignty, but presents the conflict itself between the old and the new as embodied in a modern hero's confrontation with an ancient myth. Shakespeare does not limit himself to the use of traditional material to convey a present-day concern; he seems rather to have realized that this is precisely the root of the problem—that the spirit of the modernity is ill at ease with traditional modes of expression, that the new man must come to terms with the loss of the old frameworks; ultimately, that there is no place in the new ideology for the traditional metaphors, though these cannot be lightly abandoned.

Notes

2. See e.g. G. Goetinck, Peredur: A Study of Welsh Tradition in the Grail Legends (Cardiff, 1975), and sources there given.
13. The function of these is not dissimilar from that of the labyrinth: as the Theseus story illustrates, yarn and labyrinth are merely two versions of one same symbol; like net and web, the labyrinth—whether
cave or catacomb, castle or ocean, forest, darkness, or riddle—is the great symbol of the testing, wherein the seeker loses or finds the wielder of Sovereignty—and loses, or finds, himself. See Aguirre, ‘The Riddle of Sovereignty’, MLR 88 (1993), 273-82.

15. See Gollancz, Sources of Hamlet, 95.
16. Ibid. 184.
17. These two conform to a motif often found in Saxo, as in Snorri's Edda and other Scandinavian texts, which involves the eternal alternation between a land-king and a sea-king. It must be clear that Horwendil and Feng are alternate kings, much as Atreus and Thyestes are in Seneca's tragedy—much as, in a more obscure way, Old Hamlet and Claudius are. This quality reinforces the mythological status of Shakespeare's 'characters'.
18. Gollancz, Sources of Hamlet, 188.
19. Ibid. 161.
20. A debased German redaction of Shakespeare's play, the 18th-century Der Bestrafte Brudermord ('Fratricide Punished'; in G. Bullough (ed.), Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare (London, 1975), vii. 128-58) explicitly adopts the traditional view: ‘Alas, my only son has entirely lost his reason! And I am much to blame for it! Had I not taken in marriage my brother-in-law, I should not have robbed my son of the crown of Denmark’ (Der Bestrafte Brudermord, IV. vi). There it is, in all its coarse simplification: the crown depends on the queen's marriage, and it is her choice of husband that has led to the present state of affairs.
22. Metalepsis, the violation of narrative levels, is rife in post-modernism; for discussion see B. McHale, Postmodernist Fiction (New York, 1987).
23. See Aguirre, The Closed Space: Horror Literature and Western Symbolism (Manchester, 1990), esp. ch. 3.
26. The History of the Kings of Britain, tr. L. Thorpe (Harmondsworth, 1982), VII. x.

**Criticism: Thematic Roles: Millicent Bell (essay date 1998)**


*In the following essay, Bell contends that Hamlet does not fulfill his expected role as a revenger because Shakespeare's intent was to satirize the revenge-play genre that was popular at the end of the sixteenth century.*

When, at the end of the second act, Hamlet bawls, “Bloody, bawdy villain! / Remorseless, treacherous, lecherous, kindless Villain! / Oh vengeance!”, the audience laughed, I guess, the way modern audiences laugh when viewing Mel Brooks's Young Frankenstein. They recognized a horror-thriller style old-fashioned enough to be funny; this was the way the Revenger hero of Thomas Kyd's Spanish Tragedy had ranted on the stage fifteen years before. Shakespeare's modern editors disagree about the “Oh vengeance,” which appears only in the 1623 Folio version of the play. The editor of the Arden edition, who commits himself to an earlier Quarto text, where it is missing, thinks it must have been put in later by someone else, probably an actor. It jars, he feels, with the brooding self-reproach Hamlet has just expressed after hearing the player orate about the avenging of Achilles by his son Pyrrhus and about the grief of Hecuba over slaughtered Priam. The editor
of the New Cambridge *Hamlet* thinks Shakespeare wrote it himself: “This cry, the great climax of the rant with which Hamlet emulates the Player, exhausts his futile self-recrimination, and turns, in proper disgust, from a display of verbal histrionics to more practical things.” I, too, think it was Shakespeare's, but I disagree about its tone and intent. It is really a nudge to the funny bone of the sophisticated theatregoer of 1602. It resulted from the irrepressible leaking out of the playwright's satiric impulse in the midst of high seriousness.

If so, it is a small sign of what happens elsewhere. The elocutionary set piece that has moved Hamlet is itself an imitation of the style of a creaky older play about Queen Dido of Carthage. Hamlet is not put off by its stiff rhetoric; the mercilessness of the blood-smeared Pyrrhus and Hecuba's lamentation stir him profoundly by their application to his case. But the theater buffs in the audience must have been amused. Perhaps also by “The Murder of Gonzago,” which the company of strolling players puts on according to Hamlet's instruction. This is to be another “Revenge Tragedy”—as the type is called—one, like Kyd's, with a Spanish setting, but it will represent his own father's murder and so cause his uncle to acknowledge his crime. Its parodic character is indicated by Hamlet's impatient exclamation to the actor who comes on as the murderer: “leave thy damnable faces and begin. Come, the croaking raven doth bellow for revenge.”

“The Murder of Gonzago” is, I would say, a fictitious play invented by Shakespeare as an example of the kind of play he makes fun of at various points in *Hamlet*. Though Hamlet is supposed to have added some lines there is no evidence of the voice we know him by in the fragment we hear before a terrified Claudius rises from his seat. It is stale bombast cast into out-of-style couplets, unlike the naturalistic dialogue enclosing it. Shakespeare seems to have wanted to exaggerate its theatricality. He sets it in contrast with the reality of a modern—though medieval—Denmark. At the same time, Shakespeare is letting the audience know it is going to see the unfolding in *his* play, despite its realism, of just another such tale of teeth-grinding and bloody setting-to-rights as those it used to find so thrilling. The *Hamlet* world is a contemporary realm, and the thought behind it, as I shall be suggesting, belongs to that latest Renaissance moment which Shakespeare shares with Montaigne. Yet it deliberately frames its modernity within an archaic kind of story (ultimately finding its model in Seneca), that of its probable source, a lost Revenge Tragedy, also by Kyd. This “ur-Hamlet,” as the scholars call it, was undoubtedly the play remembered by a contemporary as including a “ghost which cried so miserably at the Theatre, like an oyster-wife, *Hamlet* revenge.” Shakespeare's *Hamlet* has all the prescribed features of the once popular genre (and its surprising retro success helped bring the genre back into popularity). It has a ghost who demands revenge for a murder and a hero who promises to achieve it, pretends to be mad, indulges in philosophic soliloquies, and does not succeed in his purpose till the end of five acts. Even the play-within-a-play is a favorite of older plays of this kind. Like *The Spanish Tragedy*, which has all the features just mentioned, *Hamlet* also has a secondary revenge plot which brings about the completion of the main plot; it is Laertes' drive to avenge the death of *his* father, Polonius, which takes the action to its finish. The audience would recognize these reprises and wait for the turn Shakespeare would put on them. What he did was employ them all with a difference—make a teasing mystery of the delay of the execution of revenge which once had served just to extend suspense, make his hero’s detached soliloquies exceed in profundity and poetry anything the theater had ever heard, make the madness the Revenger is supposed to feign to conceal his purposes an occasion for paradoxical wit and cynical philosophy as well as a symptom of the hero’s mental anguish, introduce in Laertes the model of the effective Revenger yet use Hamlet’s relation to the Polonius family as an opportunity to contrast him with “normal,” or ordinary, persons. But, as though reminding the audience of his effort to reincarnate the old Revenger persona, Hamlet will still shout at the end, when Laertes threatens to outdo him in melodramatic grief for Ophelia, “I’ll rant as well as thou!”

*Hamlet*’s postmodern status as “metatheater”—theater about theater—is obvious enough. We might suspect a personal self-reflexiveness in it. Was not Shakespeare himself an actor? Shakespeare was a theater man, fascinated by the problems of his craft—and his Hamlet not only knows the history of Elizabethan drama but gives judicious advice to actors and can act creditably himself, can write a dramatic script or part of one, and he loves to see a play put on, quite aside from its possible use as a conscience-catcher. As a result, there are,
from the earliest moment to the last, occasions when the curtain between the theatrical and the supposedly real is rent—beginning with Hamlet’s remark when the ghost can be heard groaning as it retreats to its purgatorial exile: “You hear this fellow in the cellarage”—“cellarage” being a term that reminds the audience that an actor is making noises down in the space beneath the stage.

“Metatheatricality,” as it may be too modish to call it, is detectable elsewhere in the literature of the Elizabethan stage, and Shakespeare’s earlier plays give an emphasis to common terms that suggest the theater, words like tragedy, play, perform, show, act, scene or part, are frequent. Hamlet is particularly rich in such language. What has not been noted is that Hamlet’s theater interest—and all the hints and references to the theatrical in the play—constitute a metaphoric motif and the tracking sign of a dominating theme. Hamlet abounds in situations in which the actors are audiences. When Hamlet observes Claudius at prayer, he is the unseen watcher who does not detect the deception in the performance; the King’s repentance is momentary only and will not gain him salvation. Hamlet himself is watched by Polonius from behind an arras both in the “nunnery” scene with Ophelia and parallel scene with his mother in her closet. With Ophelia, Hamlet is, perhaps, consciously “playing a scene” for her benefit but unaware of hidden witnesses. Most productions of the play want to make it somehow possible for Hamlet to demonstrate that he knows about Polonius’ proximity—and improvise a rustle behind the arras at which Hamlet starts before he asks Ophelia where her father is. But the theatricality of the situation lies precisely in Hamlet’s oblivion—as an actor must be oblivious of the audience in the darkened theater. Meanwhile, the “nunnery” scene itself is more than an occasion for the abuse of poor Ophelia; it is a commentary on the unreliability of appearances, for Hamlet will tell her not to trust the seeming in men, not even his own pose as a lover (“We are arrant knaves all, believe none of us”). He abuses her as though she were herself a deceiving person—or an actress (“God hath given you one face and you make yourselves another”).

In the play-within-the-play, the player king is a representation not only of the dead King Hamlet but of Claudius, an usurper who plays at being the true king (“a king of shreds and patches”), and brings to mind the way Richard II is represented continually as one who can say, “thus play I in one person many people.” “The Murder of Gonzago” is a representation of the main play’s actuality. But this actuality is itself the matter of the play, Shakespeare’s Hamlet. And this flow of theatricality expands outward from the edge of the stage. Those ranks of interested spectators in the Danish court who watch the performance by the visiting players are mirrored by the theater filled with the spectators of Hamlet. Each spectator in either audience is, besides, not only a viewer of the action but an actor, too. “All the world’s a stage,” as Jacques says in As You Like It. We who watch Hamlet are not only spectators but actors in parts prescribed—some larger cosmic theater enclosing us.

That Shakespeare did not take the Revenge plot altogether seriously is signified by the way he let its coherence lapse. Much has been made of Hamlet’s reasons for delay. He himself gives no reasons. What is clear is that his slowness to execute revenge against Claudius is not due to the explanation available in his sources—that it is difficult to get at a monarch surrounded by his guards; Shakespeare omits the guards present in these earlier versions of the story. Hamlet never complains of lack of opportunity. Though he pretends to be mad it is not evident what purpose this really serves; in the revenge plays it diverts suspicion while in Hamlet it actually arouses it, and it is not always clear if or when Hamlet is pretending to be crazy or when indulging in a bizarre humor or when expressing his desperate but sane anguish. The soliloquies seem even more disconnected from the action surrounding them than is true in other plays of the type. The first announces Hamlet's desire for suicide—that this “too too solid flesh would melt”—without justifying cause beyond his mother's remarriage, since he still has not learned about his father's murder. In “O what a rogue and peasant slave am I,” having just heard the player's Pyrrhus-Hecuba speech, Hamlet reproaches himself because he can “say nothing” to match such passion, then shifts, illogically, to accuse himself of having been like “a whore” who can only “unpack [his] heart with words” instead of acting. “To be or not to be,” following shortly upon his resolution to confirm Claudius' guilt by means of his expectable reaction to “The Murder of Gonzago,” reverts to the theme of suicide so inappropriately that some scholars feel that it must
have been misplaced in the texts we have. “How all occasions do inform against me,” which follows the appearance of Fortinbras and his troops in the fourth act, renews his resolution (“from this time forth, / My thoughts be bloody”) when the moment for action may well be passed, even though it is at this time that Hamlet most clearly reproaches himself (“I do not know / Why yet I live to say this thing's to do, / Sith I have cause, and will, and strength, and means / To do't”). The fact of the matter is that he is about to board ship in forced exile to England. But precisely these “weaknesses,” these denials of the dramatic coherence the standard Revenge plot provides, open up larger questions of human identity and destiny. In his indifference to causality even when available in his models, Shakespeare reveals the nature of his struggle to evade tradition and audience expectations.

There is a discrepancy between the hero and the play, but this results from what I take to be a general skepticism to be felt in the tragic plays Shakespeare would write from Hamlet on—a skepticism threatening our confidence in the consistency of character and in the linking of character to either its origin in outer circumstance or its effect in action. The cavalier way in which Shakespeare ignores the logic that his sources often provide, inferior as they are, has not been sufficiently observed—so great is our admiration for his wonderful art. But as he does in the case of Hamlet, Shakespeare will actually reduce the motivation available in his source for Macbeth. In Macbeth he seems to want to show us the inexplicable spectacle of a good man doing an evil deed. Othello, also, ignores the suggestion of comprehensible causes for Iago's malignity which Shakespeare's source provides. And it is not only Iago who is “motiveless,” as Coleridge said, having no real reason for his fiendish malice. Othello's jealousy arises from provocation so inadequate that it is difficult to understand how anyone so reasonable could have been inflamed by it—and so, Iago's persuasive powers must be made nearly demonic. In acting out his preposterous rage Othello's character must be temporarily transformed from what it was.

Hamlet is a mystery play, and concealment and secrecy are essential to its style, but they serve, also, to reinforce the idea that appearances, like the actor's role, are deceptive. The ghost itself is forbidden, it tells Hamlet, to tell the secrets of its prison house; otherwise, it could a tale unfold of horrors to make the hearer's hair stand on end like porcupine quills! The murder is known only to the perpetrator; Claudius' guilt is “ occulted.” As the ghost relates, Hamlet's father was killed, significantly, by poison in the ear, “by which the whole ear of Denmark is by a forged process of my death rankly abused.” Hamlet himself continues to keep it secret, swearing Horatio and Marcellus to silence not only about the ghost but about his plans to assume a mask himself, to put on an “antic disposition” to hide his purposes. Of course the usurping murderer is the supreme example of dissembling; and Hamlet cannot get over the way “one may smile, and smile, and be a villain.” The play is full of spying—another way of seeing those spectatorial moments when a hidden witness watches a performance as though shown in a theater. Polonious, who sends a spy to look into the life abroad of his own son, is ludicrous and inefficient in his secret-service surveillance of Hamlet, and dies for his spying upon the Prince. Only when he is dead is he said by Hamlet to be, at last, “most still, most secret, and most grave.” But deception and disguise do not break down, finally, to reveal the unchangeable truth—as in detective fiction; the character of Hamlet remains identified only with a succession of appearances.

As the play, in the first act, shifts from Hamlet to the Polonius family, Laertes' counsel to his sister to resist the sweet speeches of the Prince suggests that human nature, especially a prince's, is determined by social position—and has no other meaning. “He may not, as unvalued persons do, / Carve for himself, for on his choice depends / The sanctity and health of this whole state.” Hamlet's love is definable only by his limited power to “give his saying deed.” Polonius' advice to his son, which seems a string of stale truisms—because so often repeated as counsel to the young—boils down to the idea that self-expression should not be attempted. “Give thy thoughts no tongue, / Nor any unproportioned thought his act.” But if the self should not be expressed, what is the meaning of the famous conclusion, “This above all, to thine own self be true”? Is there a self to which one can be “true” without letting it be heard or seen in speech and action? To Ophelia he gives advice that echoes her brother's resort to the familiar metaphor of theatrical costume. Hamlet's vows, he tells her, wear false vesture (he uses the unusual word “investments”). They plead “unholy suits” while
pretending holy intent. The idea that personal reality is something shaped or “carved,” not inherent in character, may be implied even when Hamlet facetiously ponders with Polonius over the shapes of clouds. He seems to have in mind the arbitrariness of all our interpretations which impose form and meaning on the meaningless, but it has been noted that the passage resembles one in *Antony and Cleopatra* when Antony says to Eros, after describing cloud shapes that resemble now this, now that,

My good knave Eros, now thy captain is
Even such a body. Here I am Antony
Yet cannot hold this visible shape, my knave

I suspect that in *Hamlet* the talk about clouds also implies something about the way our characters seem fixed in one form or another but are really capable of infinite change. Hamlet tells Ophelia that he has “more offences at my beck than I have thoughts to put them in, imagination to give them shape, or time to act them in.” He is all potentiality. There is no limit to the unenacted, unthought, unimagined “offences” of which he might be capable.

Hamlet’s first utterance in the play is a reference to the problematic relation of essence and appearance and, at the same time, to the representation of this problem by the theatrical. He comes on stage clothed in the black of mourning, and the Queen, already speaking metaphorically, asks him for a change of mood, saying, “cast thy nighted colour off.” She asks him why death “seems so particular” to him, and he answers,

Seems, madam? nay it is. I know not seems.
'Tis not alone my inky cloak, good mother,
Nor customary suits of solemn black,
Nor windy suspiration of forced breath,
No, nor the fruitful river in the eye,
Nor the dejected haviour of the visage,
Together with all forms, moods, shapes of grief,
That can denote me truly. These indeed seem,
For they are actions that a man might play,
But I have that within which passes show—
These but the trappings and the suits of woe.

This is more complex than appears at first glance. Hamlet is not saying that he has put on a false appearance to cover a true self. He does not deny the message of his appearance, for it declares his grief. Yet the way he looks and behaves constitutes only signs, after all, “actions that a man might play” as on the stage, a collection of gestures established by tradition for a role and easily enacted by the accomplished actor. If there is an inner mystery of some sort it is one that escapes all arts of action or expression and can hardly be spoken of, for no terms of description or manifestation exist for it. Shakespeare, the creator of theatrical character, expresses his own recognition of the conventionality of all the ways in which drama represents the self, and also the conventionality and insufficiency of all self-conceptions by means of which men and women carry on.

Hamlet resists all typological confinement. Is he bold or hesitating, passionate or sluggish, loving or cold, refined or coarse? The evidence for the first term in these pairs is what attracts us to him, yet the evidence for the second set of terms is plentiful—and those many attempts to summarize his character and explain his behavior in a unitary way must founder. Some of his negative aspects are off-putting enough to threaten his position as the hero. His reluctance to kill Claudius when he was kneeling in prayer—because then he might not send him straight to hell—shocked Dr. Johnson. His contrived killing of his sleazy false friends, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, has seemed to many to be something that should have been beneath him. He is too brutal and vulgar with his mother and Ophelia. Yet we endure these spectacles for the glimpses given of that noble nature that Ophelia remembers, his tender filial memory and his appreciation of Horatio’s friendship, and his generosity to the rash Laertes, who deals him his death blow. And the elevation of his mind, his play of wit and philosophy, his keen understanding of others and of society. Horatio’s loyalty is a
warrant we accept, for Horatio is our representative in the play—the sensible, decent, ordinary man who gives his complete loyalty to someone worthy of it. But the contradictions remain. Shakespeare's hero may be seen as someone who wants to be undetermined, unclassifiable, though, ultimately, he can find no selfhood outside of prescribed forms, no history but in established plots. He cannot be anything other than the Revenger the play sets out to make him.

Some say too quickly that Hamlet is a humour type—a melancholic, or a victim of an excess of black bile; he himself wonders if the devil has not been able to delude him with a false ghost “out of my weakness and my melancholy, / As he is very potent with such spirits.” Then there is his madness to which one might refer his inconsistency; sometimes put on but perhaps not always. At the very end he apologizes to Laertes for his intemperate wrath.

I am punished

With a sore distraction. What I have done,
That might your nature, honour and exception
Roughly awake, I here proclaim was madness.

But neither melancholy nor madness is really the right explanation for the overmastering philosophic doubt—and the mood that leads to Hamlet's desire for death. In Hamlet the incoherence of what men do is profoundly and continuously explored. The famous “To be, or not to be” soliloquy at the beginning of the third act, spoken on the day the court play is to be presented, says not a word about this imminent test of Hamlet's suspicions and does not mention revenge. The question it opens is, most critics have supposed, again the issue of suicide. “To be” may be read as, simply, “to live,” and “not to be” as, simply, “to die.” If this is the choice that poses “the question” and if it is meant to be paralleled (A:B as C:D) in the alternatives then offered—whether it is “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”—one must assume, somewhat implausibly, that the ending of his troubles by the taking of arms against them is deliberate and certain suicide. But the choice is phrased so abstractly that one can also say that these terms are syntactically in opposition (“chiasmatically,” their order reversed to make the comparison A:B as D:C) with the ideas of passive suffering and active battle. In this way, to act is “to be.” Merely to feel is “not to be.” Hamlet may be reflecting that there is no being aside from our deeds. Still, are we only our acts? If Hamlet seems to be appealing to an “inmost part” of Gertrude when, in the closet scene, he proposes to set a glass before her in which she may view her true self, he also pleads with her to be an actress, “to assume a virtue if you have it not,” with the hope that the appearance of virtue will, somehow, create an essence.

That Hamlet is inconsistent, variable, even uncertain himself as to who he is—this corresponds to his skepticism about human conceptions in general. The play, we must remember, is contemporaneous with Montaigne's Essays. Florio's English translation was published in London only months, perhaps, after the staging of Shakespeare's play. Perhaps Shakespeare saw the Florio Montaigne even before it was published; the very phraseology of the English version as well as Montaigne's balancing of contrary arguments is echoed, some think, in the soliloquies. Hamlet brings Montaigne to mind when he says about Denmark being a prison, “There's nothing good or bad but thinking makes it so”—a reflection expressed in Montaigne's essay, “That the taste of goods or evils doth greatly depend on the opinion we have of them.” But Montaigne particularly denied the stability—or even reality—of personal essence, saying, “there is no constant existence, neither of our being, nor of the objects. We have no communication with being, for every human nature is ever in the middle between being born and dying, giving nothing of itself but an obscure appearance and shadow.” Montaigne also wrote, in the essay, “Of the Inconstancie of our Actions,” “We are all framed of flaps and patches and of so shapeless and diverse a contexture, that every peece and every moment playeth his part. And there is as much difference found betweene us and our selves, as there is betweene our selves and other.” What being we have, then, is only what we assume in that phantasmic play in which we struggle to escape and to fulfill an idea of ourselves which owes its shape to cultural formulations.
“All the world's a stage” has so long been a platitude that one is apt to forget how revolutionary it might have sounded when first uttered, and how the idea is likely to shock us still when expressed by a modern thinker like Clifford Geertz in his well-known statement, “There is no such thing as human nature independent of culture.” In Shakespeare's time the tension felt by those who adventured out of the bounds of inherited status—new classes, new professions—was intense, and what one was, as an individual, became more problematic. The process that Stephen Greenblatt calls “Renaissance self-fashioning” was strenuous and fraught with anxiety. For Shakespeare, a “new man” who was making a name and a fortune for himself in a once-despised trade, the problem of selfhood was fundamental. But the literature of the theater, changing with such rapidity in the few years of his participation, directly dramatized the contest between prescribed form and innovation. The standardized types into which mankind might be classified were no longer fixed in society nor were they for more than a moment useful literary conventions. What Shakespeare thinks of such types is represented in his portrait of Laertes—the perfect avenger, but stupid and not really so honorable when he consents to have his rapier poisoned in order to make sure he will win the duel with Hamlet. Osric, the courtier fop, a comic type himself, is the spokesman for fading categories when he describes Laertes in typecasting terms as the “absolute gentleman … the card or calendar of gentry; for you shall find in him the continent of what part a gentleman would see.”

Hamlet's personal speeches, even aside from the soliloquies, often express an excessive despair that has baffled the critics. He tells Rosencrantz and Gildenstern,

I have of late, but wherefore I know not, lost all my mirth, foregone all custom of exercises, and indeed it goes so heavily with my disposition that this goodly frame, the earth, seems to me a sterile promontory; this most excellent canopy, the air, look you, this brave o'erhanging firmament, this majestic roof fretted with golden fire—why, it appeareth no other thing to me but a foul and pestilent congregation of vapours. What a piece of work is a man! How noble in reason, how infinite in faculties, in form and moving how express and admirable, in action how like an angel, in apprehension how like a god! The beauty of the world, the paragon of animals—and yet to me, what is this quintessence of dust? Man delights not me—no, nor woman neither, though by your smiling you seem to say so.

It is complained that Hamlet's expression of such thoughts to such auditors, who can only respond with stupid snickers, is preposterous. Besides, he does know why he has lost all his mirth. The explanation generally offered is that he is trying to throw these spies off the scent. The Cambridge editor of the play says, “So often pointed to as a brilliant perception of the anguish of Renaissance man in general and of Hamlet in particular, it is a glorious blind, a flight of rhetoric by which a divided and distressed soul conceals the true nature of his distress and substitutes a formal and conventional state of Weltschmerz.” But I would say that the instinctive response of reader or hearer to the power of the famous speech is sounder than this critical insistence upon its plot-logic. Hamlet has ceased to be, as he so often ceases to be, simply the character whose motives advance the plot. What he expresses is the root of his gloom, his sense of the paradox in the contradictions of human nature. Hamlet's desire for suicide, which continually erupts in the midst of the action and seems to have no sufficient explanation in the plot, derives from the discrepancy between what is felt and what is done that the play will go on to reinforce after the first soliloquy. To lose all one's mirth without apparent cause is to be someone whose altered response to life is all-inclusive and goes beyond specific occasions. In contrast with his ghostly, impalpable sense of self, the outer man and his roles are “too too solid.”

Hamlet's “lunacy,” as Polonius calls it, may have been apparent before Hamlet heard the ghost's tale. His melancholy, as the first soliloquy showed, has already aroused that loathing for sexuality which even causes him to wish that his own flesh would melt. But he can put on the madman act, as he shows in his exuberant teasing of Polonius or of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern—and yet baffle them by the famous “method” in his madness. Ophelia's report to her father about Hamlet's strange behavior makes it appear that he has been driven out of his mind by the repulse she has administered at her father's command. Polonius is conversant
enough with conventional typology to recognize in Ophelia's description the standard symptoms of what was called “love ecstasy.” But the audience may legitimately suspect it was all “an act”—an exhibition of that pretended madness Hamlet has resolved upon. Beyond this uncertainty, however, I want to point out another which is generally overlooked. Simulated or no, Hamlet's appearance of madness is a representation of the fragility of that notion of identity in which he has ceased to believe. It is this uncertainty that is even expressed in Ophelia's authentic mad talk. “Lord, we know what we are, but we know not what we may be,” she says. Is not madness what we call “not being oneself”—an alienation from the essential consistency one prefers to believe in? But what if one has ceased to believe in it? By keeping us in continual doubt about Hamlet's madness, Shakespeare raises this suspicion of essences and of any truth beyond appearance.

Hamlet's transformation into an avenger requires him to surrender, as much as he can, his character as lover. He has sworn to the ghost that he will wipe away from the table of his memory “all trivial fond records” and let only the ghost's command remain. In this process his previous character has been constricted. The nature of man as a sexual being, and of woman as one, also, is reduced. From the outset of the play Hamlet is oppressed by the idea of sex as a perversion; his mother has caused him to look at the consummation of marriage with loathing, as an incestuous horror. In retrospect, he regards even her feeling for his father as a kind of gluttony: “she would hang on him / As if increase of appetite had grown / By what it fed on.” No one is chaste in the Danish court—not even Ophelia, in his view. It is unnecessary, I think, to psychologize this, as has so often been done—to see Hamlet as suffering from oedipal fixation on his mother, hatred for the usurper father now represented by Claudius. Hamlet's rejection of the “normal” sexual and familial set of attitudes is still another mark of the shrinking of identity with which he is afflicted.

Does Hamlet ever come close to accepting entirely—or rejecting without question—the Revenger model? There is one moment when, I believe, he invokes it consciously—and puts it aside. As he goes to meet his mother in the third act he revs himself up with an old-style invocation of dark powers—then dismisses their prompting,

'Tis now the very witching time of night,  
When churchyards yawn, and hell itself breathes out  
Contagion to this world. Now could I drink hot blood,  
And do such bitter business as the day  
Would quake to look on. Soft, now to my mother.  
O heart, lose not thy nature; let not ever  
The soul of Nero enter this firm bosom.  
Let me be cruel, not unnatural:  
I will speak daggers to her but use none.

“When churchyards yawn” is a reminder to himself of the ghost who returned from the realm of death to lay its demand upon him. Now it is the “witching hour,” as we still say, when he “could drink hot blood,” as murdering witches were believed to drink the blood of their victims. Now he could do the unnamable horror that “the day would quake to look on.” But he draws back. He will “speak daggers” to his mother but he will not commit the crime of Nero, the matricide. He calls upon something almost never acknowledged in this drama of borrowed, fabricated selfhood—upon the promptings of the heart, “of nature.” But it is not “nature” that keeps him from killing the King when he comes upon him in prayer—on the way to the Queen.

“Nature” as a term for an original human nature that persists despite the impositions of borrowed form appears rarely in Hamlet. The principal reference that comes to mind is that curious comment on Danish drunkenness which Hamlet makes as he listens in the first act to the “heavy-headed revel” of the royal wedding feast. Hamlet speaks here of “nature” as a source of human defect: “So oft it chances in particular men, / That for some vicious mole of nature in them, / As in their birth, wherein they are not guilty, / Since nature cannot choose his origin.” The passage, deleted from the Folio, seems out of place as a reflection Hamlet might make as he waits for his father's ghost to appear—except, perhaps, for the fact that the ghost
refers to his own “days of nature” when he committed the crimes for which he suffers now.

But “histrionics” is never discarded altogether by Hamlet. He had wondered, after hearing the player's recital, that he himself was so inferior in expression, having “the motive and the cue for passion” that he had. He found himself in competition with an actor who lacked his own great “cue”: “What's Hecuba to him?” He is in a similar competition later on, in the fourth act, with the Norwegian Prince, Fortinbras. Fortinbras, who has put aside his original desire to revenge his own father's death and recover his property, now marches to Poland with an army of twenty thousand to gain a worthless scrap of land, finding “quarrel in a straw”—while Hamlet, “a father killed, a mother stained,” still has not acted. And Hamlet is stirred and humbled by such an exhibition of pure performance without motive—which is really like the actor's. “How all occasions do inform against me / And stir my dull revenge,” he begins his last soliloquy.

Witness this army of such mass and charge,
Led by a delicate and tender prince,
Whose spirit with divine ambition puff'd
Makes mouths at the invisible event,
Exposing what is mortal and unsure
To all that fortune, death, and danger dare,
Even for an eggshell.

The difficulty with Fortinbras' presence in the play has not been addressed properly by the critics. Most commentators think of him in comparison or contrast with Hamlet because he is heard of at the very beginning as a son aroused to reprisal by a father's cruel death; one is tempted to see a parallel between him and Laertes and even ancient Pyrrhus as instances of unhesitating filial action. Laertes really is a misguided hothead and Pyrrhus a butcher who makes Hecuba, with her copious tears, a foil to Gertrude who has dried her own too quickly. But they fulfill their avenger roles. Fortinbras, however, disappears as an avenger promptly. Claudius averts his threat to Denmark by sending envoys to Fortinbras' uncle, the King of Norway—and by return mail, one might say, news arrives that this rash young man has promised to give up his personal project and embrace instead an assignment to lead his soldiers elsewhere. Has he any persisting role in the play? Well, someone has to be there at the end to pick up the pieces and assume the throne—Horatio would hardly do as Denmark's new king; he is not a royal person. The great Harvard Shakespearean, George Lyman Kittredge, made the matter even simpler. The dramatic character of highest rank customarily spoke the speech which brings an Elizabethan play to a close, and so “this accounts for the presence of Fortinbras in Hamlet. But for him there would be no one left of sufficient rank to fulfill this office.” But there may be a special meaning in the resemblance of Hamlet's late envy of Fortinbras and his early envy of the stage actor who performs his part with such noble fervor. In both cases it does not seem to matter that the brilliant performances of the theatrical actor and the soldier are without personal motive. Their merely spectacular action for action's sake seems superior to Hamlet's inadequate expression of what he calls “excitements of my reason and my blood.” Hamlet's envy even expresses that existential lack of confidence in essences and in the connection of character and deed which is at the heart of the play, for only acts, in this skeptical view, count, not intention. Pragmatically, Man is no more than “a beast” if “capability and godlike reason … fust in us unus'd.” Inner selfhood has no real existence compared to the show of those who “find quarrel in a straw / When honour's at the stake.” Earlier, in the “To be or not to be” soliloquy, as I have noted, “to be,” may be interpretable as action, mere “in the mind to suffer” as “not to be.” But such a challenge to the importance of essential being and the necessary relation it bears to doing may have been too radical and disturbing a skepticism for Shakespeare's audience. Because Hamlet seems finally ready to acknowledge his laggardliness as an avenger, modern directors often retain the fourth act Fortinbras passages even though self-reproach seems out of place at a moment when Hamlet has been rendered powerless and is a virtual prisoner. Shakespeare might have had second thoughts about this dramatic illogic. But, besides, the skeptical paradox posed by the Fortinbras model was bound to puzzle many. This final soliloquy of Hamlet and the preceding scene which provokes it are found in the quarto, probably Shakespeare's own earlier script, but they are absent from the later Folio text of Hamlet, the longest of such cuts in a revision which may have been
made with the playwright's consent. Perhaps the acting company's director or even Shakespeare himself cried "Cut!" at this point when the play was first run through.

Death, of course, is the ultimate loss of selfhood, and the jesting of the gravediggers and of Hamlet in the last act is not merely comedy but reflects that mystery. Where are those selfhoods of the politician, the courtier, the lawyer, "with his quiddities now, his quilllets, his cases, his tenures, and his tricks," of the lady painting herself an inch thick, and of Alexander the Great and Caesar, and of Yorick? Yet it is precisely at this moment when the awfulness of the loss of identity by death is brought to mind that Hamlet is also made to recall his own childhood, when, as a little boy, he was carried on Yorick's shoulders. When he leaps into Ophelia's grave to contest with Laertes, it is not only with the declaration of the love he has denied, but with a momentary sense of recovered selfhood. “This is I, Hamlet the Dane,” he shouts in thrilling tones as though setting himself into history along with his father, who bore the same name. Yet this renewed identity is, after all, the rage of the old action-man that his father was and expected him to be. To Laertes, he says in a desire not to be exceeded, “Woo't weep, woo't fight, woo't fast, woo't tear thyself? / Woo't drink up eisel [vinegar], eat a crocodile? / I'll do it.”

Finally, Hamlet is ready to acknowledge how impossible it is to avoid role-playing. He will accept the end shaped for him in the role he has been unable to elude. Describing to Horatio how he had—accidentally—discovered and foiled the plot against him on the ship taking him to England, and sent Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to their deaths, he says,

Our indiscretion sometimes serves us well
When our deep plots do pall, and that should learn us
There's a divinity that shapes our ends,
Rough-hew them how we will—

A good many critics have found Hamlet's easy disposal of this paltry pair, “no shriving-time allowed,” as somehow too brutal for the “sweet prince” we love, and wince at the fact that when he kills Claudius at last it is not only with the “envenom’d” rapier but, gratuitously, by a forced swallow from the cup of poisoned wine as well. But Hamlet has accepted the Revenger role, and the crude ruthlessness which goes with it, by this time. The divinity that shapes our ends is commonly thought to be a reference to God's determination, to which, it is said, Hamlet at last acquiesces. But the religious note is so scantily sounded in this play that one may as properly think of the shaping force Hamlet calls “a divinity” as simply Destiny—something assigned to us as much by custom and circumstance as by Divine intention. Hamlet may be alluding to Matthew 10:19 when he tells Horatio, as he prepares for his duel with Laertes, “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.” But his sense of ineluctable necessity is a part of the acceptance of the role into which he has been “shaped” by determinants that are not necessarily heavenly. I think of them, in relation to my idea of Shakespeare and his times, as the determinants Geertz refers to when he speaks of “culture” as the definer of character.

The ghost (very uncertainly a divine messenger; there is strong Protestant theological argument behind Hamlet's idea that it could be an impersonating fiend) appears as an agent whose task it is to haunt Hamlet literally and figuratively with reminder of his Revenger role. In the closet scene with Gertrude it appears to “whet [Hamlet's] almost blunted purpose.” Hamlet has passionately inveighed against her “act / That roars so loud and thunders in the index”—her marriage to his uncle, “in the rank sweat of an enseamèd bed, / Stewed in corruption, honeying and making love / Over the nasty sty”—but has said not a word about the murder. There is a tradition that Shakespeare himself took the part of the ghost in performance. In a sense it is Shakespeare who is both haunted and haunting. It is he himself who tries to escape the expectations of his audience—yet, ultimately, cannot really do so. As the play wears on, the ghost quite disappears. At the last, when its appeal for revenge is about to be answered, Hamlet hardly speaks at all about his father except to
mention that he used his signet to seal the death warrant of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and to refer to the murder of his father (whom he now calls, more impersonally, “my king”) as one item only in his charges against his uncle:

He that hath killed my king, and whored my mother
Popped in between th’election and my hopes,
Thrown out his angle for my proper life,
And with such cozenage—is't not perfect conscience
To quit him with this arm? And is't not to be damned
To let the canker of our nature come
To further evil?

—a speech in which, among other reasons for killing Claudius, one hears of frustrate ambition, which Rosencrantz and Guildenstern had scented in Hamlet (much to one's annoyance, when one heard them say so). The word “revenge,” which one would expect to hear at the end, is never sounded. Hamlet, in a last reminder of theatricality, turns to the audience in the theater as well as to witnesses on the stage when, dying, he says,

You that look pale, and tremble at this chance,
That are but mutes or audience to this act
Had I but time, as this fell sergeant death
Is strict in his arrest, oh I could tell you—
But let it be. Horatio, I am dead,
Thou livest; report me and my cause aright
To the unsatisfied.

But what account of Hamlet Horatio will give is no longer clear. “Story,” in a received sense, the story of Hamlet and his “cause”—has collapsed, and Horatio now speaks only of the “accidental” and “casual” and mistaken chances that produced the carnage on the stage. He does not speak of revenge, that chain of calculated steps leading inexorably to conclusion.

How these things came about. So shall you hear
Of carnal, bloody, and unnatural acts,
Of accidental judgments, casual slaughters,
Of deaths put on by cunning and forced cause,
And in this upshot, purposes mistook
Fallen on th'inventors' heads.

If there is another story to tell, only the play itself tells it.

Hamlet (Vol. 59): Further Reading

CRITICISM


Distinguishes between the degrees of Stoicism in the characters of Hamlet and Claudius and follows the development of the Stoic philosophy in the play as a whole.

Describes the biblical story of the murder of Abel by his brother, Cain, and then connects it to the story of familial loss, rage, and bloodshed in Hamlet.


Asserts that while Hamlet is not a tragicomedy, it is a play that depends upon substantive comedic elements to make its tragic conclusion more powerful and convincing.


Studies the play-within-the play, The Murder of Gonzago, in order to point out that Francois de Belleforest's adaptation of the Saxo Grammaticus story influenced Hamlet more than previously believed.


Describes Hamlet as a play about boundaries, citing the conflict between public and private worlds as well as the conflict between the self and its sense of identity.


Contends that eighteenth-century censorship of the character Ophelia transformed her into a more sexualized and subversive character than Shakespeare had intended her to be.


Assesses Hamlet in relationship to Shakespeare's other plays, focusing, for example, on the recurrent theme of deception.


Suggests that the tragedy in Hamlet results from the conflict between masculine power, feminine feeling, and the ultimate defeat of feeling.


Observes that Hamlet is a play about the relentless search for knowledge warring with a desperate need for denial.


Reevaluates Hamlet's character as representative of madness and of the medieval morality figure, Vice, rather than of noble aims.

*Gives a psychoanalytical reading of the play, locating Hamlet's slowness to avenge his father's murder in his own ambivalent preoccupation with death.*


*Focuses on Hamlet's sources and on several productions of the play in order to demonstrate that the fundamental plot deals with social hierarchies and the need either to reform or destroy them.*


*Examines the character of Ophelia from multiple perspectives: historical, critical, and textual.*


*Examines the dual reading of the line “Get thee to a nunnery,” and its implications for the female characters in Hamlet.*


*Asserts that Shakespeare drew heavily upon Aristotelian theory in constructing his play, and that in Prince Hamlet he created a character he genuinely admired.*

**Hamlet (Vol. 71): Introduction**

*Hamlet*

Considered to be the world's most popular tragedy, *Hamlet* combines the emotional power of a family in crisis with the political intrigue surrounding the corruption of the Danish court. Hamlet finds himself at the center of this drama following the death of his father, the King of Denmark, whom Hamlet believes has been murdered by the king's own brother, Claudius. To make matters worse, Claudius has married Hamlet's mother, Gertrude, and has become the new king. The character of Hamlet continues to be a source of major critical commentary and debate. Critics are particularly interested in Hamlet's delay in avenging his father's death, and his supposed madness. Other areas of critical concern include the role of the theater and of theatricality within the play, issues of sexuality and gender roles, and the play's treatment of the conflicts between reason and emotion, and between man as a victim of fate versus man as the controller of his destiny. Modern film and stage directors of *Hamlet* grapple with how to dramatically represent these issues as well.

Hamlet's delay in avenging his father's death has perplexed many readers and critics. Paul Gottschalk (1973) examines the prayer scene, in which Hamlet has the opportunity to kill Claudius while he is praying, and discusses both Hamlet's delay and his overall character. Hamlet states that he does not kill the king during prayer because his revenge would be spoiled; he believes that Claudius, killed at prayer, would not be damned to Hell. Gottschalk contends that this scene reveals Hamlet's villainy, and finds it to be a true low point in his spiritual journey. However, by the end of the play, Gottschalk maintains, Hamlet ultimately achieves redemption and spiritual regeneration. Taking another approach to the analysis of Hamlet's delay, John Hunt
(1988) examines the play's use of corporeal imagery in order to show that Hamlet is unable to adequately react to the demands made upon him by the Ghost until he accepts his own physicality and overcomes his contempt for the body. Hunt suggests that the physical body is used not only as a symbol of Hamlet's disgust for physicality, but it additionally serves as a representation of the spirit, Christ, the Church, and the body politic. Psychoanalytical interpretation of Hamlet's character is a popular area of critical study as well. Bennett Simon (2001) reviews the major trends in the psychoanalytic analysis of Hamlet, the play, and several other characters. In his discussion, Simon analyzes Hamlet in light of trauma theory, which suggests that the shattering of basic assumptions—including the assumption that close individuals may be trusted and that the stability of family and the natural world may be counted on—results in the development of a sense of unreality in the affected individual. In Simon's survey, he examines the question of whether Hamlet is acting or is truly mad.

The play's treatment of theatricality and the role of the theater is another area of critical study. Charles R. Forker (1963) analyzes the implications of the way the theater functions as a symbol in Hamlet, contending that the theater serves as a symbol for the exposure of unseen realities and the revelation of secrets. Brent M. Cohen (1977) argues that Shakespeare's use of the theater, particularly the unique design of the Elizabethan theater, allowed Shakespeare to challenge his audience in unique ways. Cohen shows that the absence of physical barriers between the stage and the audience in the Elizabethan theater gave the audience a conflicted understanding of their role within the action of the play. Cohen emphasizes that in Hamlet, Shakespeare used the theater, theatricality, artifice, and performance to develop the audience's sense of self-consciousness; he did not use the theater. Cohen stresses, for the purposes of encouraging audience identification with the characters in the play. Critics Michael Taylor (1971) and Eric Levy (2001) have studied the play's conflicts between fate and destiny, and between reason and emotion, respectively. Taylor contends that the central conflict in Hamlet is between “man as victim of fate and as controller of his own destiny.” Taylor characterizes the first four acts of the play as being pervaded by the notion that man is the master of his own destiny, and argues that this idea is reflected in the way language is used by characters to control and disguise meaning. In the fifth act, Hamlet's attitude changes, Taylor contends, in that Hamlet has come to believe that man is in fact limited in his ability to affect his destiny. Levy is concerned with the play's treatment of the control of emotion through reason, and demonstrates that Hamlet is concerned not just with controlling emotion through rational thought, but with the use of rational thought to provoke emotion. Levy's analysis is informed by his study of the Christian-humanist doctrine on reason and emotion as outlined in the Aristotelian-Thomist system. Exploring the issues of sexuality and gender roles, James W. Stone (1995) investigates the way in which androgyny is represented as a collapse of sexual difference through the portrayal of Hamlet as feminized and impotent and the depiction of Gertrude as masculinized and castrating. Such a collapse in sexual difference, Stone maintains, generates a related collapse in moral meaning and a disintegration of moral boundaries in the play.

Hamlet's continued popularity has made it a favorite of both film and stage productions. John P. McCombe (1997) and Samuel Crowl (1998) both examine Franco Zeffirelli's 1990 film production of Hamlet, starring Mel Gibson in the title role and Glenn Close as Gertrude, and find that it focuses heavily on the mother-son bond between Hamlet and Gertrude. McCombe charges that Zeffirelli is overly concerned with this relationship and its dysfunctional nature, to the point that the play's political issues are ignored. Crowl takes a more favorable view of Zeffirelli's somewhat narrow focus. He praises Zeffirelli's casting, textual editing, and exploitation of cinematic space and landscape, and claims that the film offers a full exploration of the play as a family romance centered around Gertrude. Hamlet remains popular on the stage as well. Marguerite Tassi (2001) reviews a stage production of the play directed by Peter Brook, noting that Brook's adaptation is often viewed as controversial. Tassi explains that Brook eliminated from the play all that he deemed “inessential,” resulting in a simple and stark production designed to direct the audience's awareness to the play's exploration of the philosophical problems of being. While Tassi praises Adrian Lester's performance of Hamlet, she contends that the production suffered from problems related to Brook's textual alterations. Bernice W. Kliman (2001) assesses Brooks's production as well, comparing it with John Caird's version of the play for the
Royal National Theater, starring Simon Russell Beale as Hamlet. Kliman praises both productions, particularly the performances of Simon Russell Beale as Hamlet in Caird’s play and Adrian Lester's Hamlet in Brook's production.

Hamlet (Vol. 71): Criticism: Overviews And General Studies


[In the following essay, Blits offers an overview of Hamlet, examines the play's characters, language, structure, and content, and argues that play provides a critique of the Renaissance.]

Hamlet takes place in the early sixteenth century—a time of intellectual rebirth and religious reformation in Denmark. As we see throughout the play, Hamlet's Denmark is marked by the ongoing rediscovery of classical or neoclassical antiquity on the one hand and the rising reformation of the Christian doctrine of salvation on the other. While the Middle Ages still cast a long shadow, the medieval world of constancy, chivalry, tradition, honor, and martial virtue has largely given way to a new age of mobility and change—of tradesmen, industry, wealth, diplomacy, and commerce (1.1.73-98).1 The manly virtue of old Hamlet now seems to be merely a memory:

A was a man, take him for all in all,
I shall not look upon his like again.

(1.2.187-88)

Virtually all the characters in Hamlet still believe in purgatory, angels, saints, and ghosts, and take very seriously the rites of the Catholic church. Denmark is still a Catholic country.2 Yet, Shakespeare not only has Hamlet conspicuously pun on the Diet of Worms (4.3.19-21), the imperial council that banned Martin Luther for refusing to repudiate his new doctrine. Shakespeare also mentions four times (within just fifty-five lines) near the start of the play that Hamlet and Horatio have been studying at Wittenberg (1.2.113, 119, 164, 168). Wittenberg, one of only two universities that Shakespeare ever refers to by name,3 was famous in the early sixteenth century for its teaching of both humanism (Marlowe's Dr. Faustus taught there) and Luther's new doctrine of salvation (Luther lectured there for some thirty years and posted his ninety-five theses in Wittenberg in 1517).4 Scholasticism, now largely replaced by humanism and the new Protestant theology, has been mostly reduced to a gravedigger's cant:

For here lies the point: if I drown myself wittingly, it argues an act, and an act hath three branches—it is to act, to do, to perform; argal, she drowned herself wittingly.

(5.1.9-13)

In more than the most obvious way, the Middle Ages, at once absent and present, take the form of a ghost in Hamlet.

Where the medieval world was rooted in a fixed hierarchical order based largely on birth and kinship, Danes now live, travel, and study abroad; follow foreign tastes and fashions (e.g., 1.3.70-74; 1.4.10; 2.2.426; 5.2.144-60); and know and care what other nations think of them (e.g., 1.1.88; 1.4.17-22). Even while nearly all the scenes occur within the royal castle in Elsinore and none occur more than a few miles away, throughout Hamlet we hear of international travel: Hamlet and Horatio have been studying in Germany (1.2.112-22, 164-68); Laertes twice returns from Paris (1.2.50-63; 4.5.96ff.; also 1.3.1-88), where other “Danskers” also live (2.1.7); Reynaldo goes there to spy on him (2.1.1-73); a foreign company of touring actors comes to
Elsinore (2.2.314ff.); a Norman horseman travels to Denmark to show his skill (4.7.80-102); Hamlet is sent to England, accompanied by Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and returns with the help of pirates (3.1.171-77; 3.3.4; 3.4.202-7; 4.3.40-60; 4.6.8-26; 4.7.42-45; 5.1.143-50; 5.2.1ff.); Danish ambassadors travel to Norway and back (1.2.33-40; 2.2.40-51, 58-80); English ambassadors arrive in Denmark (5.2.359, 373-77, 381-82); and a Norwegian army crosses Denmark to fight against a Polish outpost and returns (2.2.72-80; 4.4.1-30; 5.2.367-408). We also hear a polyglot of names—Latin, Greek, French, Italian, German, and other foreign names, and only a few Scandinavian or Norse. Indeed, while the king is named after a Roman emperor, one of his castle's sentries bears the name (in Spanish or Portuguese) of the only country the king is ever said to have served against (4.7.82), and his chief advisor is named (in Latin) for another foreign foe (1.1.65-67). The distinction between Dane and non-Dane has become greatly attenuated. Even as Horatio fears for the well-being of “our state,” he confounds the general region and the Danish kingdom (“our climatures and [our] countrymen” [1.1.72, 128]). And although a Dane by birth, he not only needs to be told a Danish custom known far and wide (1.4.7-22; cf. 1.2.175), but considers himself “more an antique Roman than a Dane” (5.2.346). Education, he seems to think, can supersede birth.

But if Shakespeare's Danes seem to feel quite at home in foreign times and places, their new cosmopolitan worldly outwardness is matched by a new moral inwardness. Some commentators say that Hamlet's tragedy lies in the conflict between pagan and Christian virtue—the one emphasizing pride, anger, ambition, and action; the other, humility, forgiveness, lowliness, and patience. According to this view, while Hamlet tries to combine these two moralities, Shakespeare shows how they are in a fundamental tension with each other and that their attempted combination, by making conflicting demands upon Hamlet, ultimately paralyzes him. In fact, however, the pagan virtue rediscovered by the Renaissance and pursued by Hamlet is not the political virtue of Greece or republican Rome, let alone the heroic virtue of Hercules or Achilles, but the Stoic virtue of imperial Rome. It is the virtue of Seneca, not of Scipio, of Epictetus, not of Camillus. Rather than encouraging action, it emphasizes the radical inwardness of the soul. Stoicism places happiness in virtue and virtue in what a man himself can control. While no one can control the vicissitudes of fortune, a man can control his disposition toward their effects. So long as nothing external breaks into his will or affects his judgment, no misfortune can touch his soul and disturb his happiness. As Hamlet says in high praise of Horatio:

As one, in suff'ring all, that suffers nothing,
A man that Fortune's buffets and rewards
Hast ta'en with equal thanks.

(3.2.65-68)

Protected behind the secure barrier of his inner life, a Stoic depends entirely on his inward state for his virtue and happiness. Similarly, notwithstanding its fundamental difference from Stoicism in other key respects (including teachings regarding the hereafter, the necessity of grace, and the morality of pride), Luther's new doctrine of salvation emphasizes virtue's radical inwardness while denigrating action. In opposition to the scholastics, who granted the necessity of God's grace but also held that man can contribute something to salvation by his own efforts, Luther argues that whatever good man does is wholly the work of grace. Since no action can contribute at all to salvation, man can be saved by faith alone. “[F]aith alone, without works, justifies, frees, and saves.” True religion thus becomes wholly inward. “The inner man cannot be justified, freed, or saved by any outer work or action at all,” for “faith can rule only in the inner man.” Only the inwardness of faith, not any “external thing,” can justify man before God. Thus, far from pulling Hamlet in opposite directions, both Christian and pagan virtue pull him away from action, the one by placing virtue in the inner world of faith, the other by placing it in the inner world of the mind.

In his famous encomium on man, Hamlet describes the world as a splendidly ordered cosmos with man, “the
beauty of the world” (2.2.307), at its center. In both man and the cosmos, there is a fundamental harmony between the visible exterior and the invisible interior. In both, outward beauty reflects inner goodness, motion follows order, and change takes place within the permanence of a rational, ordered whole. No gulf separates the best in man from the natural world (2.2.295-309).12 Hamlet mentions this view, however, only to say that he no longer holds it. Instead of reason governing the world, he now sees only fortune and inconstancy—only chance and change. In his view, everything is mutable, nothing in the world abides. Rather than reason guiding and sustaining men's actions, purpose follows memory, memory follows passion, and passion follows fortune (2.2.235-36; 3.2.336-63). Men are forgotten as soon as they die, if not sooner; and “reason panders will” (1.2.137-57; 3.1.103-48; 3.2.123-33, 147-49; 3.4.40-103). And just as neither their loves, their memories, nor their vows are constant, so, too, men's appearances and actions are not to be trusted.

Seems, madam? Nay, it is. I know not “seems.”

.....

For they are actions that a man might play;
But I have that within which passes show.

(1.2.76, 83-85)

Only “that within” “can denote [a man] truly” (1.2.83).

In place of action, Hamlet chooses acting. If outward action disappears into inward virtue, it also both disappears into and reappears out of stage-acting. Hamlet turns stage-acting into action (“The play's the thing / Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the King” [2.2.600-1]) and action into stage-acting (“You that look pale and tremble at this chance, / That are but mutes or audience to this act” [5.2.339-40]). The two senses of “act”—to do and to simulate—are exchanged. Paradoxically, as Hamlet's moral life becomes radically internalized, it also becomes thoroughly externalized. As Hamlet turns away from what merely seems, he turns to what is entirely seeming. The middle realm—the realm of action—vanishes into the opposite extremes. While he rejects the actions that a man might play, Hamlet plays the actions that a moral life might contain. His moral life becomes a self-dramatization. This inversion goes to the heart of the play.

Hamlet retreats both into his soul and onto the stage to escape “the drossy age” (5.2.186). The golden age, for him, is the chivalrous age of his manly father. In contrast to that time, there are now few opportunities for noble action in Denmark. Instead of duels of single combat (1.1.83-98; 5.1.139-40), we find battles of competing theatrical tastes (2.2.328-58), gentlemanly contests of horsemanship (4.7.70-101), fencing matches in which the winner need only beat the odds (5.2.105-80), and endless battles of wit and words.13 Notwithstanding Horatio's apparently firsthand description of old Hamlet's armor and face in battle (1.1.63-66), Ophelia's calling Hamlet a “soldier” (3.1.153), and Claudius's saying that he “serv'd against” the French (4.7.82), it is not clear that any living Danish noble has ever actually fought in battle for Denmark. Despite the threat of war at the start of the play (1.1.73-110; 1.2.17-39), Laertes seeks to return to Paris and Hamlet to Wittenberg, neither giving a moment's thought to the kingdom's military needs. Nor does Claudius seem to notice or to care. As he is protected by foreign mercenaries (“Switzers” [4.5.97]), so, too, he depends on “foreign marts for implements of war” (1.1.77). In contrast to old Hamlet (1.1.87; 1.2.25; also 1.2.187; 3.4.53-63), no living Dane is ever called valiant, courageous, manly, or brave (cf. 2.2.578; also 1.3.65). “Bravery” now means mere bravado (5.2.79). Accordingly, while many young nobles or aspiring nobles simply affect the outward form of fashion (5.2.184-91), wealth by itself, without virtue or distinguished birth, may now earn a man a place at the king's table (5.2.86-89).

Most important—and evidently the cause of all the rest—there is neither a feudal system nor a public realm in Denmark. Unlike in a feudal system, although the nobles elect the king, they are entirely dependent on him for their positions. Only members of the royal family have noble titles. Polonius is not a duke or a baron, but an “assistant for a state.” As his position is an official function, not a hereditary power, his title is conferred by
the king (the “state”) and held only during the king's pleasure (2.2.164-67). Moreover, the king's power, in
general, appears absolute. Men depend on his will and act on his command. Laertes may not return to France
without his leave (1.2.50-63), and the king and queen may command their subjects' service:

Might, by the sovereign power you have of us,
Put your dread pleasures more into command
Than to entreaty.

(2.2.26-29)\(^{14}\)

And, unlike in a republic, there is no political discussion or debate in Denmark. Although \textit{Hamlet}
contains a
great deal of oratory, the only example of political oratory is Claudius's opening speech. In it, the new King
simply announces his decisions rather than trying to persuade the court of anything (1.2.1-39). The only other
time he publicly justifies his action, the nobles, again, listen in silence (4.3.1-11; cf. 4.1.38-40). Of the three
sorts of young Danish noblemen we see, one group (Rosencrantz, Guildenstern, and Osric) seeks to advance
by favor of the king; another (Laertes) is interested only in purely private goods (pleasure, personal freedom,
and his own family); and the third (Hamlet and Horatio) seeks refuge by retreating from the world. It surely is
no accident that \textit{Hamlet} begins just before and ends just after the reign of a man with the name of the Roman
emperor Claudius. In precluding noble action, the drossy age of Denmark closely mirrors the drossy age of
Rome.

The Renaissance, as Shakespeare shows, is a rediscovery or imitation of neoclassical Rome, which is itself an
imitation of classical Greece. Having conquered Greece militarily, Rome was itself conquered culturally.
“Greece, the captive, made her savage victor captive, and brought the arts into rustic Latium” (Horace,
\textit{Letters}, 2.1.156-57). The Renaissance is thus an imitation of an imitation—a modern imitation of a Roman
imitation of Greece. Pedantic Polonius, who often echoes Greek and Latin authors and whose own name
means “Poland” in Latin, gives his children Greek names. The sequence of his family's names mimics the
historical sequence, read backwards. More specifically, the Renaissance's rediscovery of antiquity is a
rediscovery or imitation of the ancients' rhetoric and poetry, but not of their political or military deeds. The
only republican Roman Hamlet ever mentions is Roscius, an actor (2.2.386; cf. 3.2.239, 385; 5.1.206).\(^{15}\) And
the only nonmythical Greek is Alexander the Great, the destroyer of the classical polis, whom he mentions in
conjunction with Julius Caesar (5.1.191-210), the destroyer of the Roman republic and the only Roman
Horatio ever names (“the mightiest Julius” [1.1.117]). Appropriately enough, Horatio's name, in Latin, means
“orator.” Machiavelli, writing at the same time as the dramatic setting of \textit{Hamlet}, criticizes Renaissance
humanists for rather admiring than imitating ancient deeds. They imitate works of ancient art, but not deeds of
ancient virtue (Machiavelli, \textit{Discourses on Livy}, I pref.). Machiavelli's criticism holds true of the humanists in
\textit{Hamlet}. Instead of imitating ancient deeds by doing others like them, they imitate ancient deeds by portraying
them on the stage. Characteristically at a remove from action, they enact rather than act; they simulate rather
than emulate.\(^{16}\) “I did enact Julius Caesar. I was killed in the Capitol. Brutus killed me” (3.2.102-3). In
\textit{Hamlet}, the word “deed” never refers to a noble action. With just one exception, it always refers to a “foul,”
“ugly,” “rash,” “bloody,” “bad,” “vile,” or “wicked” misdeed, namely, murder or incest.\(^{17}\) On the other hand,
theatrical tropes—terms like “stage,” “audience,” “act,” “actor,” “mutes,” “cue,” “applaud,” “play,” “player,”
“plot,” “part,” “argument,” “prologue,” “scene,” “show,” “shape,” “rant,” “perform,” “put on”—suffuse the
play,\(^{18}\) and are especially frequent on Hamlet's lips.\(^{19}\) Hamlet, Shakespeare's most theatrical character, is at
various times a playwright, actor, chorus, director, manager, audience, critic, patron, and would-be partner in
a theater company.\(^{20}\) The only man he in fact ever emulates is the First Player (2.2.531-36, 584-601).

\textit{Hamlet} dies asking that his story be told. Referring specifically to the emotional effect of ancient tragedy
(“You that look pale and tremble at this chance”)\(^{21}\) and obscuring the distinction between actors and
spectators on the one hand and actors and what they imitate on the other (“That are but mutes or audience to
After Hamlet dies, Horatio, postponing his own death in order “[t]o tell [Hamlet’s] story” (5.2.354), asks that Hamlet's body be placed “[h]igh on a stage” (5.2.383) and, after summarizing what he will tell, vows, “All this can I / Truly deliver” (5.2.390-91). Horatio will be Hamlet's midwife (cf. 2.2.208-11). Hamlet's only offspring will be his “story.” Petrarch says that ancient authors and modern humanists are like fathers and sons; while differing in every detail, they share something that painters call an air.22 Using a phrase sometimes said to epitomize the early Renaissance humanists' principle of production, Petrarch writes, “[I]ncited by texts, [the humanists] gave birth for themselves.”23 The humanists in Hamlet seem to take Petrarch's pregnant phrase literally. In the end, they beget only words and generate them out of ancient texts. Speech supersedes birth completely. Significantly enough, in a play in which families are so important, Horatio's family is never mentioned. A man who thinks that education can supplant birth, Horatio, who never exchanges a word with Hamlet about Ophelia, speaks but two lines either to or about a woman (4.1.14-15).24 Only the “earth,” he seems to think, contains a “womb” (1.1.140).

Laertes is Horatio's opposite number. Named after the famous father of Odysseus, Laertes is the chief spokesman in Hamlet for the duties and privileges of birth. Notwithstanding his father's role in Claudius's election as king, he speaks as though Denmark were a hereditary, not an elective, monarchy (1.3.16-28). To Laertes, the family means everything. Vowing not to let anything in either this world or the next—not “allegiance, … [c]onscience, … grace … [or] damnation”—keep him from being “reveng’d / Most thoroughly for [his] father” (4.5.131-33, 135-36), Laertes pledges to do whatever is necessary—even “To cut [the killer's] throat i'th' church” (4.7.125)—“to show [him]self indeed [his] father's son” (4.7.124). To have but a single calm drop of blood, he thinks, would dishonor his birth and bloodline:

That drop of blood that's calm proclaims me bastard,
Cries cuckold to my father, brands the harlot
Even here between the chaste unsmirched brow
Of my true mother.

(4.5.117-20)

Where Horatio thinks reason and choice can replace birth, Laertes thinks that “choice [must be] circumscrib'd” by “birth” (1.3.22, 18). If “the womb of earth” (1.1.140) could be Horatio's motto, “subject to his birth” (1.3.18) could be Laertes'.

Since the time of Descartes, philosophers have often separated mind and body, thinking and life. Life—the power to move and to grow—is said to be “entirely different in kind from the mind” and “nothing but a certain arrangement of the parts of the body” (Descartes, Letter to Regius, May, 1641). According to the premodern tradition extending from Socrates to the scholastics, however, the soul is responsible both for thinking and for life. It is the cause of thinking and hence of human cognition in all of its forms. And it is the cause of life and hence of animal motion of every kind. The cause of motion is the essence of awareness.25 “Sense sure you have, / Else you could not have motion,” Hamlet tells his mother (3.4.71-72). And Gertrude herself alludes to the soul's double aspect when she assures Hamlet, in turn:
And breath of life, I have no life to breathe
What thou hast said to me.

(3.4.199-201)²⁶

Speech is not only inseparable from, but indeed made up of, life. A young maid's mind ("wits") can be as "mortal" as an old man's "life" (4.5.159-60).

Because it is the single source of thinking and of life, the soul makes man a rational animal. By giving him life, it makes him similar to all other animals (4.3.16-31; 4.4.33-39), and by giving him reason, it distinguishes him from them (1.2.150; 2.2.303-7; 4.5.84-86). The soul is thus responsible for man's great latitude. It allows man to be "either a beast or a god" (Aristotle, Politics, 1253a29). By using his "godlike reason" (4.4.38), man can rise above his nature ("in apprehension how like a god" [2.2.306]), but in failing to use his reason, he can sink to the level of a beast ("Divided from ... her fair judgment, / Without the which we are ... mere beasts" [4.5.85-86]). Hence, two men—even two brothers—may be to each other as "Hyperion to a satyr" (1.2.140; also 3.4.54-67).

But even while it gives man his essentially equivocal nature, the soul's double aspect also makes him a natural unity or a whole. Because thinking and life have a single cause, man's composite nature as a rational animal has a single source. Man is a whole because his nature, though composite, is one. The single source of his doubleness makes him one. Further, man's wholeness is seen in his action. By providing a common source for thinking and motion, the soul's double aspect permits man's reason to guide his motion (1.2.150-51; 3.4.71-76). In his last soliloquy, Hamlet asks himself what it means to be a man:

If his chief good and market of his time
Be but to sleep and feed?

And he answers:

Sure he that made us with such large discourse,
Looking before and after, gave us not
That capability and godlike reason
To fust in us unus'd.

(4.4.33-39)

To be a man means not only to be alive, but to have "such large discourse" as to be able to look backward and forward both in time and in thought, and to use that capability to act.

Notwithstanding his own answer, however, Hamlet is unable to keep the soul's two functions together. He thinks without acting ("[T]he native hue of resolution / Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought" [3.1.84-85]) and acts without thinking ("O what a rash and bloody deed is this!" [3.4.27]). But even while he thus sets motion and thinking apart, Hamlet tends to collapse the former into the latter. As it turns action into theater and theater into action, Hamlet's self-dramatization of his moral life, more fundamentally, converts life into thought, soul into mind. The soul's double aspects become one. The power to think and hence to imitate subsumes the power to move and hence to act. Seeking refuge from the flux of fortune, Hamlet rejects action in the name of what lies within and truly is, on the one hand, and in the name of what is shown on the stage and simulates the world, on the other. Both refuges lie in the mind. For Hamlet, both man's inner life and the theater have a claim to truth. But, as we will see, the one has no resemblance to the external world, while the resemblance of the other distorts the world that it imitates. Not unlike Swift's Laputans, Hamlet has one of his eyes turned inward and the other directly up upon the stage. He misses the moral life that lies between.
Hamlet himself seems to trace his moral disgust at the world to his mother's hasty, incestuous remarriage (1.2.129-59). Life naturally involves doubling—the doubling of father and mother (“Father and mother is man and wife, and man and wife is one flesh” [4.3.54-55]) and the doubling of parent and child (“[T]hat day that our last King Hamlet o'ercame Fortinbras ... was that very day that young Hamlet was born” [5.1.139-43]). But Gertrude's remarriage destroys the natural doubleness. Claudius, having killed his brother, has married his “sometime sister” (1.2.8), his brother's widow, making his nephew also his son (“my cousin, Hamlet, and my son” [1.2.64]) and hence Claudius himself Hamlet's “uncle-father” and Gertrude his “aunt-mother” (2.2.372). A marriage within prohibited degrees, the incestuous “union” (5.2.331), based, moreover, on fratricide, destroys natural distinctions within the family by improperly doubling them.

Hamlet does the same with stage imitation. Like life and the soul itself, thinking involves doubleness. As Hamlet and Horatio both suggest when, using a rich classical metaphor, they speak of “the mind's eye” (1.1.115; 1.2.185), human beings naturally see double. We see what is before us, and we see what it means. With our eyes we see what is present; with our minds we can understand what it means. The human ability to separate the significance of a sight from the sight itself allows us to see or imagine what is absent, and thus to generalize, to speak in metaphors and images, to play on words, to express pithy aphorisms, and, indeed, to have poetry or theater at all: “to hold as ‘twere the mirror up to nature” (3.2.22). Hamlet, however, collapses the distinction between “the mirror” and “nature,” the imitation and what it imitates. As his mother and uncle destroy natural distinctions within the family by doubling them, he destroys both action and imitation by doubling them. Turning stage-acting into action and, then, action into stage-acting, he makes action an imitation of an imitation, and imitation itself indistinguishable from the thing that it imitates. In short, he turns his own moral life—and life itself—into a play within a play. It is no small irony that Hamlet's self-dramatization of life mirrors his mother's incest.

Shakespeare, we will see, understands the Renaissance, in general, and its characteristic intellectualism, in particular, as undermining the natural doubleness of the soul. Within the full range of the soul's activities, things that should remain double either collapse into one or redouble into more than two, or, quite typically, do both at once. The tension implicit in doubleness itself—at once one and two, a whole containing two parts—is broken.

HAM.:

What is his weapon?

OSR.:

Rapier and dagger.

HAM.:

That's two of his weapons. But well.

(5.2.141-43)

Thus, throughout Hamlet, Shakespeare emphasizes doubleness—particularly unstable, imperfect, or defective doubleness. We see it in the characters, speech, and structure of the play, as well as in its content. Both Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and Cornelius and Voltemand, seem to be redundant pairs: there are two where one would seem to do. There are also two Hamlets, two Fortinbrases, and even two Claudii—a middleman (never seen) named Claudio (4.7.39) as well as the king—and, of course, two brothers, one of whom murders the other, and both of whom marry the same woman. Conversely, virtually all the characters are internally divided or doubled. Hamlet has “cause, and will, and strength, and means,” and yet does not act (4.4.45); Claudius is “like a man to double business bound” (3.3.41); “Poor Ophelia [is] / Divided from herself”
Gertrude's heart is "cleft ... in twain" (3.4.158); only "a piece" of Horatio is present (1.1.22); and Laertes acts "almost against [his] conscience" (5.2.300). There are also characters who double as both actors and audience or as both actors and what they imitate ("You are as good as a chorus, my lord" [3.2.240]; "You that look pale and tremble at this chance, / That are but mutes or audience to this act" [5.2.339-40]). Further, nearly everyone feigns, impersonates, or dissembles—or is suspected of doing so. Some feign madness, friendship, kindness, knowledge, ignorance, virtue, or breeding; some impersonate others in drama, song, or recitation, and perhaps even in "form" or "person"; and some dissemble or disguise their intentions and actions. And there are corpses and a ghost—bodies without souls and a soul without a body. Not surprisingly, Hamlet opens with the question "Who's there?" (1.1.1), which, despite its obvious urgency, is never properly answered.

Shakespeare, likewise, emphasizes doubling in the characters' speech. We frequently hear oxymorons, antitheses, doubles, privatives, puns, echoes, conjunctions, disjunctions, contradictions, comparisons, and hendiadys. Hendiadys, which abound in Hamlet, are especially fitting. Containing grammatical units which are parallel in structure but not in meaning, they are false conjunctions, deceptive paris. They unite what they appear to pair.

As for structure, Hamlet begins at midnight (1.1.7), with a change of guard. "[T]wice before, and jump at this dead hour," (1.1.68) the ghost has appeared and will do so twice again in the opening scene. Old Hamlet has been dead "two months" (1.2.138; 3.2.128), or "two hours" (3.2.125), or "twice two months" (3.2.126). It has been "[t]wo months" since Lamord came to Denmark (4.7.80), and Hamlet is at sea "two days" when the pirates attack (4.6.14). Laertes has a double departure ("a second leave" [1.3.54]) for Paris, as well as two returns (1.2.51-53; 4.5.88). Hamlet twice decides to have the players perform The Murder of Gonzago (2.2.530-37, 584-601); Polonius, "seeing unseen" (3.1.33), twice spies on Hamlet (3.1.32-37; 3.4.4-5); Ophelia makes two mad appearances (4.5.21-73, 154-97); Claudius twice uses poison to murder, first old Hamlet, then young Hamlet (1.5.59-75; 4.7.155-61); and Hamlet twice asks Horatio to tell his story (5.2.343-45, 351-54). Moreover, as Polonius is killed in place of Claudius (3.4.31-32), Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are killed as substitutes for Hamlet (5.2.12-53).

In addition, much of Hamlet displays self-mirroring. The play ends with a fatal duel that answers the single combat we hear of at the start of the play, with Hamlet undoing what his father had done and young Fortinbras recovering what his father had lost (1.1.83-107; 5.2.355ff.). More generally, later scenes are often mirror images of correspondingly placed earlier ones. In the third scene from the beginning, for example, we first see Ophelia. In the third scene from the end, we learn of her death. The fifth from the beginning starts with Polonius seeking information about his son and ends with Polonius describing Hamlet as having been driven mad for Ophelia's love. The fifth scene from the end starts with mad Ophelia singing of love and ends with Laertes furiously seeking information about his father's death. Further, almost all the scenes contain a ring structure, with later parts, similarly, answering correspondingly placed earlier ones. And just as the scenes thus tend to be symmetrically arranged both externally and internally, so, throughout the play, deeds are returned upon those who do them. "[P]urposes mistook / Fall ... on th'inventors' heads" (5.2.389-90). Laertes and Claudius are killed by Hamlet with the sword and poison with which they had meant to kill him ("I am justly kill'd with mine own treachery" [5.2.313]). Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are killed by order of the commission that they were carrying to lead Hamlet to his death. Polonius, who pledges his life for the accuracy of his report ("Take this from this if this be otherwise" [2.2.156]), is killed while trying to prove the mistaken report true. And Gertrude, defying Claudius for the first time, drinks to Hamlet's health, only to be killed by the poison her husband had meant for her son. Moreover, Hamlet, who relishes the prospect of having "the enginer / Hoist with his own petard" (3.4.208-9), not only kills Rosencrantz and Guildenstern with what was meant to produce his death. He characteristically seizes upon someone else's words and turns them back upon the speaker, rebuking or taunting the speaker with the speaker's own words. Of course, a play within the play—a play that on the one hand is foreshadowed by a dumb-show and on the other is itself both "something like the murder of [Hamlet's] father" (2.2.591) and "the image of a murder
done in Vienna” (3.2.233). And there are subplots analogous to the main plot. Fortinbras and Laertes (and Pyrrhus) lose fathers, like Hamlet. Ophelia goes mad, while Hamlet pretends to.

Finally, Hamlet itself is a duplication or an imitation. The play is based on Saxo Grammaticus's twelfth-century legend of Amleth, Prince of Jutland, which, in turn, is based on Livy's story of Junius Brutus. Polonius, who seldom gets things right, speaks more wisely than he knows when, asked by Hamlet about his having acted at the university, he boasts, “I did enact Julius Caesar. I was killed i'th' Capitol. Brutus killed me” (3.2.102-3). While Hamlet's name derives from (and is an anagram of) Amleth's, the name “Amleth” is the Danish equivalent of the Latin “Brutus” (meaning “imbecile” or “fool”). And Hamlet will, of course, kill Polonius. What Brutus acted in Rome and Polonius enacted in school, Hamlet—Brutus's latter-day namesake—will act in Denmark. In this, as in so much else in Hamlet, life will imitate theater imitating life.

Hamlet presents Shakespeare's critique of the Renaissance—and of the modern age that it begins. The Renaissance, we see in the play, is characterized chiefly by intellectualism and the absence of noble deeds. As we see most especially with Hamlet himself, theory and practice, art and life, become exchanged or confused. Hamlet not only consciously turns stage-acting into action and action into stage-acting. He also finally comes to believe that things happen in life as they do in a play. A play is not only an imitation of life, but a direct duplication of life. As art imitates life, so, too, life imitates art. Theater and life mirror each other. But Shakespeare shows in Hamlet that art can imitate life only by distorting it. In a play, but not in life, whatever happens is fated by the end or the plot; actions have a unity that they lack in life. And to believe that life imitates art is to fail to recognize art's distortion of what it imitates. It is to fail to appreciate, in particular, the role of chance—the role of unreason—in life. Hamlet's trust in fate proves, literally, fatal. Setting aside a premonition and surrendering himself to fate, Hamlet walks passively into Claudius's deadly trap (5.2.208-20). In a deeper and far more general sense as well, however, Shakespeare shows, Hamlet's intellectualism is deadly. It is deadly in principle as well as in practice. Substituting speech for action, it reduces soul to mind—life to theater. Life itself becomes self-imitation; and imitation replaces generation. At once a sign and a further cause of the disappearance of noble actions, Hamlet's—or the Renaissance's—intellectualism sets the two functions of the soul apart, leaving man a divided and diminished animal.

Notes

2. E.g., 1.1.133-35; 1.3.255; 1.4.39-44; 1.5.2-104, 142-44, 173-75; 2.2.314-16; 3.2.121-22, 130, 138-39; 3.3.69; 3.4.164; 5.1.1-22, 41-49, 213-35; 5.2.47, 365. Historically, Denmark became a Protestant kingdom in 1537, following the conclusion of the Count's War. See T. K. Derry, A History of Scandinavia (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1979), 86ff.
3. The other is Oxford, which he mentions just once (2 Henry IV, 3.2.9).
6. Cf. Cantor, 4-5.
7. See, e.g., Cicero, De Finibus, 3.16ff., Tusculan Disputations, 5.42-43, Stoic Paradoxes, 16-19; Seneca, Letters, 9.2-22, 85.37, 92.3-7, On Providence, 5.7-6.9, On the Happy Life; Epictetus, Discourses, 1.1, Manual, 8, Frag., 8; Marcus Aurelius, Meditations, 4.7; Diogenes Laertiou, The Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers, 7.89ff.
8. See, e.g., Augustine, City of God, 9.4, 19.4.
13. E.g., 1.2.65-86; 2.2.173-217, 225-65; 3.2.92-148, 227-47; 3.4.8-11; 4.2.4-29; 4.3.16-37, 50-55; 5.1.115-33.
14. See, also, 3.3.7-23.
15. As if to underscore the point, Hamlet puns on Brutus's name, without mentioning it, and does so in the context of Polonius's having acted on the stage while a student (3.2.104-5).
17. 1.2.257; 3.1.53; 3.4.27, 28, 45; 4.1.12, 16, 30; 4.3.40; 5.1.241. The exception refers to Hamlet's marrying Ophelia (1.3.27). Similarly, while the emphasizing adverb “indeed” puns on the noun “deed” three times, the first and last times it has pejorative connotations (1.2.83-86, where it suggests that actions merely seem; and 4.7.124-26, where it refers to murder). The only time the pun is free from such connotations occurs in the context of the ghost and refers to swearing by a sword instead of “in faith” (1.5.151-69).
19. Particularly the word “play.” Hamlet mentions the word and its cognates 42 times (of the 58 occurrences in *Hamlet*). Apart from auxiliary verbs, the only verbs or nouns that he mentions more often are “come” (53 times), “made” (58 times), and “do” (118 times). “Act” (etc.) is said by, to, or in reference to Hamlet 11 of the 18 times it is mentioned; “put on,” 7 of the 11 times; “show” (etc.) 22 of the 31 times; “prologue” 2 of the 4 times; “actor(s)” and “audience” all 5 times, each; “scene” all 4 times; “stage” all 3; “enact” both times and; “cue,” “rant,” and “hypocrites,” the Greek word for stage-actors, the only times.
24. In addition, what could be called Horatio's only action leads, by his neglect, to the death of the woman he was ordered to protect (4.5.74; 4.6.21-22).
26. For the identification of breath and life, on the one hand, see, also, 5.2.258; cf. 5.2.171; for the identification of breath and speech, on the other, see, also, 1.3.130; 2.1.31, 45; 3.1.98; 4.7. 65; 5.2.123, 353; cf. 3.2.348-50.
28. Also Polonius (2.1.115), the Grave-digger (5.2.73), Lamord (4.7.86), the Player Queen (3.2.162-67), the Player King (3.2.159; cf. 3.2.182-210), and the child actors (2.2.343-49).
29. E.g., 1.2.87-117; 1.5.46, 176-88; 2.1.3-66; 2.2.85-151, 222ff., 3.2.336-63; 5.2.184-91.
30. E.g., 1.1.49-50; 1.2.244; 2.2.318-24, 420-25, 446-514, 545-54; 3.2.22-35, 102-3, s.d. 133, 150-223, 232-34, 246-58; 4.5.23-73; 4.6.12-28; 4.7.42-46.
Criticism: Character Studies: Paul Gottschalk (essay date spring 1973)


[In the following essay, Gottschalk examines Hamlet's character, contending that although he reveals his villainy and spiritual confusion in the prayer scene, he ultimately achieves redemption and spiritual regeneration at the play's end.]

One of the most perplexing moments in the perplexing play of Hamlet comes in the Prayer Scene when Hamlet, convinced of the King's guilt and ready “to drink hot blood,” happens upon Claudius at prayer, unsheathes his sword, is about to kill him—and then does not, giving as reason his unwillingness to send Claudius' soul to heaven and thus mar his own revenge:

Up, sword, and know thou a more horrid hent,
When he is drunk asleep; or in his rage;
Or in th' incestuous pleasure of his bed;
At gaming, swearing, or about some act
That has no relish of salvation in't—
Then trip him, that his heels may kick at heaven,
And that his soul may be as damn'd and black
As hell, whereto it goes. My mother stays.
In a famous gloss, Dr. Johnson raised the dilemma for critics to come: “This speech, in which Hamlet, represented as a virtuous character, is not content with taking blood for blood, but contrives damnation for the man that he would punish, is too horrible to be read or to be uttered.” In response to this dilemma, the critical trend from Coleridge onward has been to insist that, however horrible Hamlet's words, they do not reflect the true man; he does not really mean to contrive damnation for the man he would punish. Meanwhile, historically oriented critics have suggested that Hamlet's words, to one familiar with the ethics and conventions of Elizabethan revenge tragedy, are not too horrible to be read or to be uttered at all. Our injured sensibilities are merely anachronistic; Shakespeare's contemporaries felt no qualms at Hamlet's speech—at least, not in the theater.

Most recently, Professor Eleanor Prosser has argued convincingly that neither view is acceptable. If the speech were mere rationalization for inaction, Hamlet would have invoked some more morally acceptable motive for delay, such as unwillingness to stab in the back a man at prayer. We may add that to dismiss Hamlet's speech a priori as somehow unrepresentative of his true character, as critics have traditionally done, is arbitrary. It is hard to see how a long and powerful speech, virtually a soliloquy and thus sincere by dramatic convention, can be anything but the product of the speaker's character. Otherwise, we are asked to disregard the literal import of twenty-four lines of impressive poetry which, it thus appears, Shakespeare threw in either to mislead us or, at most, to build up suspense. Either way seems rather cheap. The historical solution to Dr. Johnson's dilemma, Prosser has shown, is equally misleading. Not only, of course, was the vengeance that Hamlet proposes irreconcilable to Christian teaching, but those characters, in fiction or on the stage, who proposed to damn the souls of their victims were villains—among them, some of the worst in Elizabethan literature—Nashe's Cutwolfe, Tourneur's Vendice, Webster's Lodovico. Historical evidence, then, bears out what Johnson felt and subsequent critics have continually sought to excuse: that Hamlet utters words too horrible to be read or to be uttered.

Prosser's solution is to controvert Johnson's earliest premise: Hamlet, in fact, is not represented at this point as a virtuous character. The Ghost's commands are diabolic, and in heeding them Hamlet abandons the teaching of Christianity to follow a course to blood-revenge and villainy. No purgatorial spirit would enjoin revenge. Prosser argues, and no purely virtuous person would seek it; Hamlet has yielded to his human nature and forgotten his spiritual—but at a time in history when human nature was making increasing demands on traditional notions of piety: “Hamlet is trapped between two worlds. The moral code from which he cannot escape is basically medieval, but his instincts are with the Renaissance. … Can God have created man a thinking creature and yet have ordered him not to use the very faculty that raises him above the animals?”

Prosser's study leaves several questions unanswered. First, why are our sympathies with Hamlet far more than they are with his villainous colleagues in other revenge plays? Second, why do we accept his final submission to the providence of God—a submission that would be ludicrously improbable in the case of Hoffman, say, or Vendice? And most important, how much difference does it make whether or not the Ghost is a devil? To identify the Ghost is not to identify Hamlet. Spirit of health or goblin damned, its behests are not so diabolic, I hope to show, as Hamlet's response to them. Just what manner of man, then, would follow a Ghost as if it were the devil—follow it, at that, in order to combat evil? For Hamlet's problem is not to be defined simply in terms of the precise doctrines between which he is torn—Christian patience versus the code of revenge, filial duty versus pneumatological caution—but also in terms of the dramatic presentation of a character thus torn. It is the sound of the rending fabric that arrests us, not the composition of the cloth. To answer these questions, I propose once more to examine the Prayer Scene as the low point in Hamlet's spiritual pilgrimage. More specifically, I propose to examine it as a prime example, among many in the play, of the perplexity with which Hamlet responds to events and arrives at decisions, and to show that Hamlet's puzzling speech reveals...
doubt and spiritual confusion that far transcend the ethical dilemma at hand.

The Romantic notion that Hamlet's words in the Prayer Scene do not reflect his true character lends itself, of course, to sentimentality, but it also suggests a possible answer to the question of why we remain sympathetic to Hamlet even at his worst: that in every action of Hamlet's we distinguish between what momentarily he is being and what potentially he is. This distinction Ernest Jones ignores in dismissing Hamlet's expressed motives for delay:

One moment he pretends he is too cowardly to perform the deed, at another he questions the truthfulness of the ghost, at another—when the opportunity presents itself in its naked form—he thinks the time is unsuited, it would be better to wait till the King was at some evil act and then to kill him, and so on. …

When a man gives at different times a different reason for his conduct it is safe to infer that, whether consciously or not, he is concealing the true reason.9

But men do not choose their pretenses at random (and, indeed, no psychoanalyst will ever dismiss the pretenses of his own patients as insignificant). What a man chooses to say about himself is a large part of what he is, and Hamlet chooses for a while to sound like a villain.

The question, then, is not what is “really” on Hamlet's mind during the Prayer Scene but, rather, what is the effect of his words on our understanding of his character. Whether the threat to the kneeling Claudius is mere fantasy or concrete plan we cannot be certain, but in any case it represents for the moment Hamlet's view of himself. To assume otherwise is to assume, with critics from Richardson to Bradley to Jones, an underlying germ of personality, simple and constant, that gives greater relevance to some of Hamlet's utterances than to others. But what happens if we do not assume that the Prince has so univocal a character? “The world of Hamlet,” C. S. Lewis observed in a famous passage, “is a world where one has lost one's way. The Prince also has no doubt lost his. …”10 What if he has also lost himself?

In fact, the play revolves around the Prince's trying on of identities. Shakespeare's other heroes sometimes may but slenderly know themselves, but they almost always seem sure of what their selves are. Each in his own way, Lear, Othello, Macbeth, Antony, and Coriolanus, sets himself up as the measure of all things. They may change, but we are aware of the change before they are; it is a change which they may scarcely examine and do not question at all but which simply happens to them. Lear goes mad; later, he wakes up sane, saner than at the beginning of the play. Throughout, he retains some sort of clear identity, and his voice, whether banishing Cordelia, holding a maddened mock trial of his false daughters, or joyfully accepting imprisonment and love, is never unsure of itself, however much Lear questions his past actions and present circumstances. Shakespeare's heroes are generally preoccupied with their deeds, and their moments of crisis occur when they discover that they have done the wrong deed, acted on a misapprehension or misjudgment. It is thus that the order of their own moral universes crumbles so that they must build a new one. They rarely ask, “Who am I?” but rather, “What have I done?” and, “What shall I do now?” If they do ask, “Who am I?” it is only to discover immediately that they are not who they thought they were. Their circumstances have led them to the question, and in asking the question, they reach their personal crises. “To be once in doubt / Is once to be resolved”: Othello’s boast might be a motto for almost every tragic hero in Shakespeare. How quickly are even Macbeth's doubts about regicide resolved into terrifying action. To be in doubt is to be resolved; none of Shakespeare's heroes accepts doubt about himself as a modus vivendi: none except Hamlet.11

Hamlet perpetually asks, “Who am I?” and receives no answer:

Who calls me villain? breaks my pate across?
Plucks off my beard and blows it in my face?
Tweaks me by th' nose? gives me the lie i' th' throat
As deep as to the lungs? Who does me this, ha?

(I.II.598-602)

This is not simply pretense, as Jones suggests, but a working at a problem:

'Swounds, I should take it! for it cannot be
But I am pigeon-liver'd and lack gall
To make oppression bitter, or ere this
I should have fatted all the region kites
With this slave's offal.

(I.II.603-7)

Hamlet accepts cowardice merely as a hypothesis confirmed in some degree by fact: “it cannot be but I am pigeon-livered.” There is no assurance here, not even the assurance of self-delusion: cowards know they are cowards, they do not have to reason out the fact. If for the moment Hamlet accepts being a coward, he does so provisionally, doubtfully. And over and over again, a speech of Hamlet's, a line, a turn of phrase will reflect back upon himself, upon his dubiety in the face of his universe and of his own personality. He is prompted to his revenge by heaven and hell; he did love Ophelia once, and yet he loved her not; he is at once indifferent honest and yet proud, revengeful, ambitious. No one else in Shakespeare seeks so much for identity in opposites, sees himself so much as the subject of contradiction.

Why yet I live to say "This thing's to do,"
Sith I have cause, and will, and strength, and means
To do't.

(IV.IV.43-46)

Is it bestial oblivion that makes him delay, or some craven scruple of thinking too precisely on the event? Critics have often taken the latter as an explanation of Hamlet's inaction. But Hamlet is raising these questions to try them on and, finally, to reject them: he does not know.

Even his inner thoughts are in part beyond his control. Again and again, some event, some object before him will intrude on his awareness and force him to accommodate it to his own mental life, to draw lessons for himself from what chance strews in his way: the sound of trumpets and cannon at the King's carousel, the sight of a player moved to tears by his own speech or of the Norwegian army moving across the stage, a skull thrown up from a freshly opened grave, or a king kneeling in prayer. Yet often the conclusion is reached only to be sidetracked or overthrown altogether by some new encounter with fact. Moralization on the Danes' drunkenness breaks off as the Ghost appears, revealing to Hamlet a Denmark where drunkenness is the least of sins. The meditation of “To be or not to be” yields to the frenzy of the encounter with Ophelia. In the graveyard, the ironical memento mori theme and variations give way to shock and grief when the actual body of Ophelia is brought on stage. For Hamlet, far more deeply than for the Player King, our thoughts are ours, their ends none of our own.

Francis Fergusson has pointed out that Hamlet is the “chief reflector” of the many-faceted action of the play: from his viewpoint more than from any other do we perceive the shifting and elusive universe of Elsinore. In his eyes, for instance, Polonius becomes a fishmonger, a moralist's senex, and an actor playing Julius Caesar ripe for slaughter. But more than that, Hamlet is many reflectors, not only because of the elusiveness and inconsistency of the world as he sees it, but also because the shifting gaze he turns on others he also turns
inward upon himself, shaping and reshaping in his mind's eye both his situation and his own character. Now he sees himself as the villain in a third-rate revenge play (“Come, the croaking raven doth bellow for revenge” [III.ii.264-65]); now as a recorder that unskillful hands are seeking to play upon; now as chief player in a children's game (“Hide fox, and all after” [IV.ii.31]).

Meanwhile, he has a task to perform. But to get done, an assigned task must reflect the doer. Ceaselessly, Hamlet tries to align himself with his situation, to find an identity in it—for, at the beginning of the play, he has none—he is neither student-prince nor king; as his first words in the play suggest, he is no longer even his father's son. At first, he can find himself only in the past, at Wittenberg or in memories of his father, whom he seeks with veiled lids in the dust (I.ii.70-71) or sees in his mind's eye (I.ii.185). But somehow he must make his unhappy truce with the intractable facts at hand, and he tries to do so at the end of the first soliloquy: “It is not, nor it cannot come to good. / But break my heart, for I must hold my tongue!” (I.ii.158-59). The action proper of the play has not yet begun, and this is the last time that Hamlet will be able utterly to hold back.

Soon he will meet his father, not in his mind's eye, but face to face. The facts of his situation will take on a new aspect as he learns of the murder, and thereafter he will evoke more threatening models: Pyrrhus, Fortinbras (“Examples gross as earth exhort me” [IV.iv.46]), and Laertes (“For by the image of my cause I see / The portraiture of his” [V.ii.77-78]). While subplots commonly reflect the main plot in Elizabethan drama, it is not so common for the protagonist to be as aware of this reflection as Hamlet is, constantly seeking in the examples of others how to be true at once to his cause and to himself.

We are used to the notion of a Hamlet looking before and after, pondering what he has done and must do; but more than that, not only does thought modify action for Hamlet, but action thought. All occasions do inform against him in the sense of appearing to him, accusing him, and forcing him to reformulate his own stance in the drama. In the face of unremitting doubt, cursing his very existence for yielding him up to the task of setting the time right, Hamlet must now seek, at every turn, to align his own existence with the existence of Denmark, to find a role that will both express himself and lead to the fulfillment of his task.

The Prayer Scene shows such an attempt. Since in *Hamlet* we are interested not merely in the outcome of a scene in overt action but also in the shape it will assume in Hamlet's imagination, the Prayer Scene really has two endings: Hamlet's failure to kill the King, and Hamlet's leaving the stage self-cast in the role of revenge villain. Character does not simply motivate this scene, nor does this scene simply reveal character: it shapes it—shapes it tentatively, as we shall see, not finally, for underlying the Hamlet who, for the worst of reasons, refuses to kill the King is the Hamlet to whom this choice and all choices are merely provisional.

What, then, does the assumption of this role reveal about Hamlet at this moment? One indication of Hamlet's attitude toward himself, as Professor Fredson Bowers has shown, is what he utters minutes after the Prayer Scene, when he stands over the dead body of Polonius:

> I do repent; but heaven hath pleas'd it so,  
> To punish me with this, and this with me,  
> That I must be their scourge and minister.

(III.iv.172-75)

“Scourge and minister”: the phrase is another example of Hamlet's vision of inner self-contradiction, for the terms are mutually exclusive. Both refer to agents of God's vengeance, but the minister is righteous and in overthrowing evil directly establishes good in its place, while the scourge is evil: although he may destroy the sinful, he is already irretrievably caught up in sin himself and damned in the very act of vengeance. His vengeance takes the form of a common crime, in which he makes his own opportunities, while heaven will provide the minister with an opportunity to act in fulfillment of public justice. The protagonist as scourge
held the stage in the revenge tragedies of the early seventeenth century. Tourneur's Vendice, Webster's Bosola, and a host of others marshaled their own way to knavery even as they cleansed the stage of even greater villains than themselves. And the Hamlet of the Prayer Scene is their spiritual forebear, as the Hamlet who has just killed Polonius recognizes.

Indeed, Bowers finds that Hamlet's self-reproaches and the delay itself stem from his uncertainty about whether he is to act as a minister or a scourge (pp. 745-46). This is certainly a far-reaching interpretation to be derived largely from a few lines that occur rather late in the play. Although Bowers argues that the Elizabethan audience would have found Hamlet's dilemma implicit in the situation into which the Ghost thrust him,\textsuperscript{15} it is risky to assume that the complexity of \textit{Hamlet} can be resolved by positing the simplicity of the age in which it was written. Yet the fact remains that toward the end of the third act, Hamlet alludes to the doctrines of minister and scourge, and that these terms imply a deep ambivalence on Hamlet's part toward his task. And, whether or not this ambivalence is implicit in the task itself all along, it lies in Hamlet's own soul.

Now, it is practically a truism of modern \textit{Hamlet} interpretation that the Prince's dejection (and, to many critics, his inaction) stems from an overwhelming, unassimilable vision of evil. And the doubt and contradiction we have already noticed in his words show that he sometimes feels himself allied with the evil that it is his duty to destroy. This double alliance is schematized in the distinction between scourge and minister and in the phrase, “To punish me with this, and this with me,” but signs abound far earlier in the play as well. Hamlet obliquely associates himself with Claudius when he laments that his mother “married with my uncle; / My father's brother, but no more like my father / Than I to Hercules” (I.ii.151-53). His flesh, according to many editors, is as sullied as that of those whom he condemns, and later on in the play, confronted with a frail woman whom he will shortly attack in some of his bitterest language, he casts himself, too, into the role of sinner:

\[
\begin{align*}
I \text{ am myself indifferent honest, but yet I could accuse me of such things that it were better my mother had not borne me. } & \ldots \text{ What should such fellows as I do, crawling between earth and heaven? We are arrant knaves all; believe none of us.} \\
(\text{III.i.123-33})
\end{align*}
\]

Although Hamlet is making himself into an Everyman here, the effect is not to exculpate himself personally but to link him to the damned universe of Denmark: “We are arrant knaves all.”

Not only does Hamlet continually seek in experience the true image of his cause, but twice he tries to force Claudius and Gertrude to respond to images he himself draws of Denmark. Yet these attempts, too, are marred by his own sense of guilt. The occasions of these attempts are the Play Scene, where Hamlet and the actors hold the mirror up to nature, and the Closet Scene, where, showing Gertrude pictures of his father and of Claudius, he sets up a glass before her where she may see the inmost part of herself (III.iv.19-20). The image of the mirror links the two scenes, which, to Hamlet, have the same purpose: to catch the conscience of the royal pair. And both images even imply a certain pedagogical confidence that Hamlet never shows when dealing with himself. Indeed, the speech to the players as well as his recollection

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{That guilty creatures, sitting at a play,} \\
\text{Have by the very cunning of the scene} \\
\text{Been struck so to the soul that presently} \\
\text{They have proclaim'd their malefactions} \\
(\text{II.ii.617-20})
\end{align*}
\]

hearken back to traditional defenses of the theater as didactic.
But what about the conscience of the Prince? Just before the mousetrap is to be staged, Hamlet explains to Horatio his plan to entrap the King:

If his occulted guilt
Do not itself unkennel in one speech,
It is a damned ghost that we have seen,
And my imaginations are as foul
As Vulcan's stithy.

(III.ii.85-89)

The speech strikes a strange note. If Claudius were innocent, then the idea that he is guilty would indeed be foul; but Hamlet does not blame the “damned ghost” for this idea: it is his own imagination that would be as foul as Vulcan's stithy, his own “prophetic soul.” Whether or not Claudius is guilty, Hamlet has created this guilt in his own mind, and it bothers him. In the Play Scene, Hamlet is trying to establish not only the honesty of the Ghost, but his own as well. It is for that reason, I think, that when the play is over he is first of all elated at his theatrical success—and why not?—“Why, let the strucken deer go weep, / The hart ungalled play” (III.ii.282-83) Hamlet hurls by way of epilogue after the retreating Claudius. The words echo his blandly ironic reply to the King’s worried inquiries about the play: “Your Majesty, and we that have free souls, it touches us not. Let the gall’d jade winch; our withers are unwrung” (III.ii.251-53). The piece of doggerel is Hamlet's triumphant declaration that he is not like Claudius—this is what the play has shown him.

Some of Hamlet's improvisational interpolations during the play, however, show something else. “This is one Lucianus, nephew to the King,” he says, as the player-murderer comes on stage. He himself is nephew to the King, he has cast himself in an equally guilty role, and he nails down the association by a thoroughly inappropriate allusion to an old play: “Come, the croaking raven doth bellow for revenge”—though Lucianus is not a revenger.16 The play holds the mirror of nature up to the King so that he may feel and proclaim his guilt; Hamlet's commentary holds the mirror up to Hamlet: he is threatening Claudius, and he is threatening him in the mode of the revenge-villain. The threat cuts two ways.

Indeed, the soliloquy “O what a rogue and peasant slave am I” (II.ii.576 ff.), with its juxtaposition of bitter attacks on Claudius and himself, makes it seem inevitable that Hamlet cannot reveal Claudius's guilt without accusing himself as well. The sequence of Hamlet's thought is significant. Having compared himself with the actor who weeps for Hecuba, Hamlet then turns to an imaginary opponent who challenges him with insults to a duel (“Who calls me villain? … gives me the lie i' th' throat / As deep as to the lungs?”). But instead of accepting the challenge, Hamlet accepts the insults (“'Swounds, I should take it!”) and continues them himself, in his own person. Then the challenge lashes out again—but this time at Claudius (“Bloody, bawdy villain! / Remorseless, treacherous, lecherous, kindless villain!”). And again the challenge suddenly lapses into self-reproach (“O, vengeance! / Why, what an ass am I!”). Professor Harold Jenkins, observing that the cry, “O, vengeance!” occurs in the First Folio but not in the Second Quarto, argues for its inauthenticity, suggesting the inappropriateness of Hamlet's “call for vengeance while he is still absorbed in self-reproaches. …”17 But it is precisely in this apparent inappropriateness that we see once more the movement of Hamlet's mind from action to reaction, as rage turns upon itself, as his thoughts leap from self-disgust to vindictive fury and back again. Then comes the plan for the mouse-trap. The Player forced Hamlet to admit his guilt; now Hamlet will try the same thing on his uncle, and the guilt-aggression cycle of the soliloquy thus expands outward into the play.18

That Hamlet's vengeance is not of the purely creative sort that characterizes God's minister appears again in the Closet Scene, when he details to his mother her sins until she can stand it no longer and begs him to stop:

O Hamlet, speak no more!
Thou turn'st mine eyes into my very soul,
And there I see such black and grained spots
As will not leave their tinct.

(III.iv.88-91)

And Hamlet should indeed be content to stop here if his purpose in “speaking daggers” is the laudable one he announced earlier: “You go not till I set you up a glass / Where you may see the inmost part of you” (II. 19-20). Nosce te ipsum—here, Hamlet echoes one of the worthiest commonplaces of Renaissance didacticism: “Therefore,” Erasmus wrote,

“seyne that thou hast taken upon thee, war aganyst thy selfe, and the chiefe hope and comfort of victory, is yf thou knowe thy selfe to the uttermost: I will paynt a certayne ymage of thy selfe, as it were in a table, and set it before thyne eyne: that thou mayst perfity knowe, what thou art inwarde, and within thy skynne.”19

Gertrude's words repeat Hamlet's very own; his didactic mission is accomplished, and he might well obey the Ghost's original command to leave his mother to those thorns that in her bosom lodge to prick and sting her. But instead he goes on:

In the rank sweat of an enseeded bed,
Stew'd in corruption, honeying and making love
Over the nasty sty!

(II. 91-94)

Three times in all Gertrude begs him to stop, and each time he continues remorselessly, attacking her and attacking Claudius, until the entrance of the Ghost forces him to break off. Here, if anywhere, T. S. Eliot's claim is justified that Hamlet's emotions are in excess of the facts as they appear. Unless Hamlet is just being sadistic, he is himself fascinated by the image of the very sins he is attacking, so fascinated that he cannot turn his own eyes from them.

When Hamlet refers to himself as a scourge as well as a minister, he is simply making explicit what has been implicit all along in his attitude toward himself: that he, too, is caught up in the rottenness of Denmark, that although he is the slayer of Winter, as Gilbert Murray observes in his anthropological study, he nevertheless "has the notes of the Winter about him."20 The psychoanalytical interpretations of Freud and Ernest Jones, too, are based upon the assumption that Hamlet secretly harbors the same incestuous desires that Claudius has acted upon. But what the psychoanalysts adduce a priori is already implicit in the text: Hamlet sees himself as a sinner among sinners.

In the context of Hamlet's sense of his own guilt, the Prayer Scene becomes clear. Hamlet speaks lines belonging conventionally to the Italianate villain (or the scourge) because that is what he has become in his own eyes. The sense of moral superiority evident at his first appearance—"Seems, madam? Nay, it is. I know not 'seems'" (I. ii. 76)—has long since died away, and now he is prompted to his revenge by hell alone. In assuming the role of villain and planning Claudius' eternal damnation, Hamlet is tacitly condemning himself as well. And this is what he has been doing all along. Only now, the play-within-the-play over and some sort of action inevitable, this reciprocal condemnation comes out most strongly, and Hamlet utters the words that have perplexed his admirers ever since.

Critics who find in these words the mere orthodoxy of revenge tragedy also see in them no more than a dutiful response to the Ghost's original command. E. E. Stoll in particular points out that Hamlet is echoing the Ghost's own lamentation on the manner of his death:
Cut off even in the blossoms of my sin,
Unhous'led, disappointed, unanel'd. ...

(I.v.76-77)

He took my father grossly, full of bread,
With all his crimes broad blown, as flush as May. ...

(III.iii.80-81)

And, Stoll continues, the prevailing principle of revenge tragedy, classical or Elizabethan, is an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. 21

But the Ghost's idea of revenge, seen in itself, transcends the old and bloody lex talionis:

Let not the royal bed of Denmark be
A couch for luxury and damned incest.
But, howsoever thou pursuest this act,
Taint not thy mind, nor let thy soul contrive
Against thy mother aught. Leave her to heaven,
And to those thorns that in her bosom lodge
To prick and sting her.

(I.v.82-88)

The Ghost is concerned with the spiritual health of his nation, his son, and his queen; he shows no private thirst to see Claudius suffer what Claudius has made him suffer. He is concerned with restoration, not with retaliation. To understand how Shakespeare altered tradition, one need only turn to Marston's Senecan tragedy Antonio's Revenge—a play that may have influenced Hamlet—in which the ghost of the murdered Andrugio, like the elder Hamlet, lays the burden of vengeance on his son's shoulders:

Thou vigor of my youth, juice of my love,
Seize in revenge, grasp the stern-bended front
Of frowning vengeance with impeised clutch.
Alarum Nemesis, rouse up thy blood,
Invent some stratagem of vengeance
Which, but to think on, may like lightning glide
With horror through thy breast. Remember this:
Scelera non ulciseris, nisi vincis.(22)

“A wrong not exceeded is not revenged”: if that is the mode in which Shakespeare chose to write Hamlet, then turning from Marston—and from Seneca and Kyd—we must find the Ghost in Hamlet pretty poor stuff indeed. Otherwise, I think, we must assume that the moderation of the elder Hamlet, hypocritical or sincere, clearly sets off the ferocity of the speech in the Prayer Scene—a ferocity that far exceeds the demands of the Ghost and is Hamlet's alone23—and that Hamlet delays revenge not because he is less bloodthirsty than the Ghost, as many critics would have it, but, paradoxically, because he is more so.

“'Tis a knavish piece of work,” Hamlet remarks to Claudius during the Play Scene, “but what o' that? Your Majesty, and we that have free souls, it touches us not” (III.ii.250-53). Of course, the King's soul is not free, but neither is Hamlet's. If it were, he would renounce his task in the name of Christian patience, like Tourneur's Charlemont, or he would kill Claudius the quickest way and have done with it, just as Shaw's Rufio in Caesar and Cleopatra kills the dangerous servant Fatateeta open-heartedly and without malice, lest she kill Caesar first. That would involve an entirely different play, of course: a Macbeth rewritten with Malcolm the protagonist, or Richard III with Richmond.24 Instead, Shakespeare shows us Hamlet at the very
witching time of night, when hell itself breathes out contagion to this world and he could drink hot blood. Under the pressure of his unfinished task and his sense of personal corruption, he commits himself to villainy. That is his answer to what the Play Scene has told him.

Yet even this commitment is qualified by the means with which Hamlet reaches it. Prepared to speak daggers to his mother but use none, Hamlet is not prepared for what he actually next encounters: Claudius on his knees, praying (III.iii.73 ff.). The new fact immediately evokes new possibilities (“Now might I do it pat”), new decisions (“And now I’ll do’t”), and then new and unforeseen results (“and so he goes to heaven”). That would be scanned. The carefully balanced antithetical construction that follows brings out once more the conflict of specific fact (the praying Claudius) with paradigm of action (the manner of the elder Hamlet’s death):

He took my father grossly, full of bread,  
With all his crimes broad blown, as flush as May;  
.....  
To take him in the purging of his soul,  
When he is fit and season’d for his passage?  

(II. 80-81, 84-86)

This part of the speech is not so much bloodthirsty as questioning. There is even a characteristic bit of Hamlet’s intellectual thoroughness that contrasts strangely and significantly with the brutality to follow:

And how his audit stands, who knows save heaven?  
But in our circumstance and course of thought,  
'Tis heavy with him. ...  

(II. 82-84)

All the worse, one might argue, to damn Claudius on the basis of a mere hypothesis about the Divine Account Books. True enough, but Hamlet is going on the best information he has—that is precisely the point: this middle part of the speech shows Hamlet the “sole son” (l. 77) trying to determine his proper role in confrontation with Claudius’ apparent and unexpected repentance. The rest of the speech, Hamlet's conclusion, is couched in the conventional terms of the blood revenger—the role he has been narrowly skirting throughout the Play Scene and which he makes a conscious effort to avoid in the soliloquy “Now is the very witching time of night” (III.iii.406 ff.).

It is a bad role, and Hamlet reaches it through morally questionable postulates, but in seeing him reach it, as opposed to seeing him identified with it from the start, we recognize that he might have chosen otherwise. Tourneur's Vendice gradually becomes as evil as his enemies, but it is clear even in his opening soliloquy that he has already made a decision to avenge that will inevitably entail his total corruption. Because his decision is never dramatized, it is seen as complete and irrevocable. For this reason, we never wholly sympathize with him: there is almost nothing to sympathize with. But Hamlet's decisions are always dramatized, and thus Shakespeare can continually imply the possibility, however remote, of their opposite. The Romantic notion, however sentimental and exaggerated, that Hamlet's speech in the Prayer Scene does not reflect the true Hamlet does show insight into Shakespeare's method of portrayal. However, instead of saying with the Romantics that the speech does not reflect Hamlet at all, we should say that it does not encompass him entirely.

I have dwelt so long and so one-sidedly on Hamlet's villainy because I think that it is central to the play and that critics who seek in one way or another to explain it away do violence to the text. The fact remains that Hamlet is the hero of the play, and if he moves as far toward sin as I have suggested, then we must expect
Shakespeare to take strong steps to redeem him at the last. And since Hamlet is portrayed as a decision-maker, his redemption is plausible and acceptable. Hamlet's spiritual regeneration, especially as revealed in the famous utterances on providence, has often been discussed. It is not only in these speeches, however, that we see Hamlet's new alignment with heaven, or else we might reasonably complain with Bradley that they express no more than fatalism, or with L. C. Knights that they present a truth glimpsed in defeat. Instead, the entire end of the play is constructed to bear out what the providence speeches indicate about Hamlet's new-found identity.

This construction becomes especially clear when we read the catastrophe in the light of the Prayer Scene and see how Hamlet's conduct differs so greatly from what it was when he found the frightened and tormented Claudius making his vain plea to heaven. To begin with, in the Prayer Scene Hamlet is on the offensive. He has caught the conscience of the King: he has delivered a blow that has sent Claudius literally to his knees. He is in control of the situation: the King kneels in guilt-stricken but hopeless prayer while, unknown to him, Hamlet stands behind with drawn sword. Claudius is the passive one, and a passive man does not appear villainous on the stage. In the final scene the situation is reversed. Claudius has regained his composure, the plotting is now all his, and where Hamlet had attacked with *The Murther of Gonzago*, Claudius now thrusts with the poisoned sword of Laertes.

But this shift in initiative corresponds to a shift in Hamlet's character itself. Earlier, planning the fencing match with Laertes, Claudius predicts the success of their ruse:

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He, being remiss,
Most generous, and free from all contriving,
Will not peruse the foils. ...
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(IV.vii.135-37)

This seems very far from describing the man who immediately sensed the dishonesty of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and later hoisted them with their own petard; who contrived the mousetrap and, shortly thereafter, the damnation of the King. Claudius is describing the Hamlet who was once the expectancy and rose of the fair state, the Hamlet who knows not seems, but certainly not the Hamlet of the middle three acts. And yet the King's prediction comes perfectly true. “These foils have all a length?” the Prince asks carelessly, choosing one at random. And when the Queen faints, poisoned from the cup intended for him, his momentary bewilderment is equally inexplicable if he is the same Hamlet of the Prayer Scene: “O villainy! Ho! let the door be lock'd. / Treachery! Seek it out” (V.ii.322-23). Just as curious is his earlier expression of regret at his treatment of Laertes at Ophelia's grave: “For by the image of my cause I see / The portraiture of his” (V.ii.77-78). But if so, he might well suspect that Laertes' intentions in the fencing match are as bad as his own were in the Prayer Scene. How he can so blandly trust Laertes is hard to explain (it deeply bothered Bradley) unless we assume that at last he has returned to judging people by his own innocence, that once more he knows not seems—or, at last, does not care to seek it out. I am stating blatantly what Shakespeare only hinted at, but the hints are there, and they subtly shape the final scene.

Elizabethan revenge tragedy commonly ends with a ceremony of some sort by means of which the revenger entraps his victim. In *The Spanish Tragedy* Hieronimo's play of Soliman and Perseda, which ostensibly celebrates peace and marriage, instead disguises death for the unwary villains. Shakespeare followed the pattern in *Titus Andronicus*, where Titus' formal offers of hospitality disarm his enemies and lead to their slaughter. Finally the masque of revengers became a cliché of the Jacobean stage. An apparent yielding to the order of the corrupt court (and, with the masque, a celebration of that very order) conceals the forces that bring about revolution. An analogous scene occurs in *Hamlet*, in which the Prince, seemingly distracted for the moment from his discontent, casually drops a bombshell in Claudius' lap. It is the Play Scene, and it occurs not at the end but in the exact middle of the drama. At the end there is another ceremony, with the
opposing sides again apparently reconciled in full view of the assembled court, and yet which disguises a
death-plot. But in Hamlet the conventional situation is reversed: the revenger enters the final scene with no set
plan, and it is the antagonist who has worked out the ceremony of death; the roles of duper and duped are
reversed. Of this Stoll approves; setting traps baited with flattery and deceit is no work for a hero. But there
is more to the reversal than that. For Hieronimo and Titus are crazed with hate, and many later revengers are
frankly villains: after the Prayer Scene, that is not the road we would want Hamlet to travel. Thus, in reversing
the conventional arrangement of the catastrophe, Shakespeare again indicates a change in Hamlet
himself—the role in which Claudius casts him is the role he himself has at last chosen.

And so not merely in his faith in providence, but also in the ceremony of the fencing match that he accepts at
the King's hands and in the guilelessness of his conduct, we see that Hamlet has at last settled into the role of
the minister whose ends a divinity will shape, who has sensed about his heart the impending tragedy—but this
time without scanning it. He was indeed “punished with sore distraction,” as he tells Laertes a few moments
before their deaths, but now it is over. The complaint of Bradley that such insouciance implies a dereliction of
duty holds true only if we assume that human acts are things unto themselves and that Hamlet is the measure
of all things in the play. But when we realize how nearly Hamlet was prompted to his revenge by hell alone, we
may be relieved that now he submits his will to heaven.

In The Spanish Tragedy Kyd leaves it unclear whether his protagonist is hero or villain. At one point
Hieronimo renounces the biblical injunction that vengeance is the Lord's and embarks on a mission of
Italianate revenge; yet at the end of the play his ghost is assigned to Elysium. Probably Kyd was more
interested in exciting stage effects than in ethics and was not much concerned with the incompatibility of
Senecan tragedy and Christian doctrine. In Hamlet Shakespeare deals with a similar situation, in which the
hero courts villainy and yet is saved at the end (and which, likely enough, Shakespeare got from Kyd's
Ur-Hamlet). But what was confusion in his predecessor Shakespeare turns into genuine dramatic tension;
what was inconsistency in Kyd becomes the uncertainty, the ambivalence that disrupts Hamlet's very being,
the tension that reaches its peak in the Prayer Scene and is not resolved until the final catastrophe. “Something
is rotten in the state of Denmark,” Marcellus announces at the end of the fourth scene. “Heaven will direct it,”
Horatio responds, almost automatically. But what comes easily to Horatio comes hard to Hamlet; awareness
of it costs him his life, but struggling in the other direction he nearly lost his soul—not in the afterlife by
espousing the wrong doctrine, but on the stage and before our eyes.

Notes

1. The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, ed. George Lyman Kittredge (Boston, 1939). Line
references correspond to the Globe text.
3. “I will venture to affirm, that these are not his real sentiments,” said William Richardson as early as
1785. “There is nothing in the whole character of Hamlet that justifies such savage enormity” (Essays
on Shakespeare's Dramatic Characters [London, 1785], p. 159). Coleridge himself saw in the speech
merely “the marks of reluctance and procrastination” (Shakespearean Criticism, ed. Thomas
Middleton Raysor, 2d. ed. [London, 1960], I, 29-30), while Hazlitt found there “a refinement of
malice, which is in truth only an excuse for his own want of resolution …” (Characters of
Shakespeare's Plays [London, 1930], p. 82). And A. C. Bradley, though adding that the hatred Hamlet
expresses is real enough, nevertheless stated “That this again is an unconscious excuse for delay is
now pretty generally agreed”; Hamlet knows “in his heart” that he is delaying (Shakespearean
4. “To put it in a word,” A. J. A. Waldock says, “the theology of the speech impresses us as incredibly
primitive. That it is primitive is readily granted. But it can make no difference: Hamlet is by no means
the only Elizabethan character who is made to utter sentiments of this kind. Their primitiveness is
merely to be accepted” (Hamlet, A Study in Critical Method [Cambridge, Eng., 1931], p. 42). See also


6. Prosser, pp. 261-75. In an earlier study, Donald Joseph McGinn also detected disapproval among Shakespeare's contemporaries of Hamlet's vindictiveness (*Shakespeare's Influence on the Drama of His Age, Studied in “Hamlet”* [New Brunswick, 1938], chaps. 2-3.)

7. Prosser, p. 164. Since the present article was written, Prof. Harold Skulsky has also discussed this dilemma, in “Revenge, Honor, and Conscience in Hamlet,” *PMLA*, LXXXV (1970), 78-87. Some of the observations in the present essay parallel his, though the basic approach is substantially different.

8. See Prosser, p. 216:

   In defiance of every probability established thus far in the play, he has apparently checked his own descent into Hell. It is not a barbaric young revenger, consumed by rage and confirmed in murderous thoughts, who appears in the graveyard, but a mature man of poise and serenity. This sudden reversal of direction in a tragedy is curious: it is as if Macbeth were to repent in the fifth act.

   This sudden reversal, as thus described, is more than curious: it is the height of improbability. Macbeth could never be allowed to repent; what makes Hamlet different?


11. “Etymologically, the word [doubt] stems from dubitare, which means precisely to hesitate in the face of two possibilities,” Harry Levin observes. “The structure of *Hamlet* seems, at every level, to have been determined by this duality” (*The Question of “Hamlet”* [New York, 1959], p. 48). This doubt extends even to the question of Hamlet's identity.


14. See Bowers, pp. 743-44, and Prosser, pp. 199-201. Prosser argues that Hamlet is by now a scourge exclusively, and indeed he would seem so even in comparison with Othello, who kills Desdemona out of a sense of justice (“It is the cause, it is the cause, my soul”) and, in addition, is scrupulously careful not to endanger her immortal soul.


16. John Dover Wilson considered the “croaking raven” speech a parodic comment on the Player, who, perhaps, is out-Heroding Herod (*What Happens in Hamlet* [Cambridge, Eng., 1935], pp. 161-62), but the audience—stage and actual—would probably have picked up the incongruity of the word “revenge” sooner than the allusion to the bombastic old *True Tragedy of Richard the Third*—to a speech, incidentally, of a villain who expects revenge to be performed on him.


18. Again, the movement of the soliloquy derives from its very context: the events leading immediately to it begin when Hamlet associates himself with Pyrrhus and actually quotes lines of bloody revenge, but as the speech continues, taken over now by the Player, it brings about the reproach of the opening lines of the soliloquy.
23. The Ghost's strongest reproach to Claudius is to call him "that incestuous, that adulterate beast" (I. v. 41); compare this with Hamlet's frenzied anger: "O villain, villain, smiling, damned villain!" (I. v. 106), or "Bloody, bawdy villain! / Remorseless, treacherous, lecherous, kindless villain!" (II. ii. 607-8). And in the Closet Scene the Ghost's entrance cuts short another violent tirade against Claudius. Whether the Ghost's moderation is genuine or, as Prosser thinks, hypocritical, the reflection on Hamlet remains the same.
24. To the extent that the avenger is acting not only in public but for the public is his revenge justified; the political revenge in a good cause often seems to transcend the strict antinomy of Christianity and vengeance; cf. the challenge of Henry V to the powers of France (*Henry V*, I. ii. 289-93). See also Hardin Craig, "A Cutpurse of the Empire," *A Tribute to George Coffin Taylor*, ed. Arnold Williams (Chapel Hill, 1952), p. 14, and the Bond of Association of 1584, in which Burghley and thousands of others swore to avenge any attempted assassination of the Queen. At the end of the play, I think this political necessity joins with honor and self-defense to seal Claudius' doom:

Does it not, think'st thee, stand me now upon—
He that hath kill'd my king, and whor'd my mother;
Popp'd in between th'election and my hopes;
Thrown out his angle for my proper life,
And with such coz'nage—is't not perfect conscience
To quit him with this arm? And is't not to be damn'd
To let this canker of our nature come
In further evil?

(V. ii. 63-70)

"This canker of our nature": Hamlet has assumed the royal plural: he speaks for the collective. And, tacitly, Horatio approves (see Bowers, p. 748).
26. Stoll, pp. 41-42.

**Criticism: Character Studies: John Hunt (essay date spring 1988)**


[In the following essay, Hunt analyzes Hamlet's corporeal imagery as a means of exploring Hamlet's persistent state of indecision, asserting that before Hamlet can respond to the demands of the Ghost, he must first come to accept his own physicality and overcome his contempt for the body.]

If Hamlet actually writes down moral lessons on his tablets as he studies his revenge, many of them surely have to do with how life is lived, and lost, in bodies. Far more even than in *Macbeth* or *Coriolanus*, the human body in *Hamlet* forms human experience, being the medium through which men suffer and act. But the body also deforms human beings and threatens ultimately to reduce them to nothing. The nonbeing lurking at the material center of being announces itself everywhere in the play's corporeal imagery, and occupies Hamlet's
mind as he tries to find his way from the regal death that initiates the action to the regal death that concludes it. This essay examines the problem in two parts, using an analysis of the imagery as an approach to the great mystery of the play, Hamlet's quandary about how to act. It suggests that Hamlet cannot adequately respond to the Ghost's commands until he learns to accept physicality, with all its dissolute inconstancy, as the image of mentality. Not until he finds his way out of a despairing contempt for the body can he achieve the wish of his first soliloquy and quietly cease to be.

I

At the end of Hamlet, all the remaining members of the two great families of Denmark lie crumpled about the stage. Meta-theatrically doubling this tableau, Horatio asks Fortinbras to “give order that these bodies / High on a stage be placed to the view” (V.ii.379-80)—an order that is carried out as the play ends. Polonius's “guts” have already been hauled off the stage less ceremoniously; Ophelia's body has been brought on with truncated ceremony and lowered into the pit beneath the stage, from which skulls have come flying up to make room for it; and all the carnage has been set in motion by the pale, glaring “dead corse” of King Hamlet. The eyes of the mind, if they are open, behold in the play's language a spectacle of ruined bodies fully as grim as what their physical counterparts behold on stage. Before hearing of and seeing the body's demise in the churchyard, we imagine an unorthodox autopsy when one gravedigger tells the other the results of the inquiry into Ophelia's suicide: “The crowner hath sate on her, and finds it Christian burial” (V.i.4-5). Grotesque visions arise when he responds to the suggestion of his companion that the original spade-wielder, Adam, was a gentleman, “the first that ever bore arms.” “Why, he had none,” the clown objects, only to be refuted in a manner that makes his statement monstrous. “What, art a heathen? How doest thou understand the Scripture? The Scripture says Adam digged. Could he dig without arms?” (V.i.30 ff.). Amputee gardeners, corpses used as sofas (perhaps two of the thousand natural shocks that flesh is heir to), and many kindred figures drive the play's physical violence deep into the minds of the audience.

The body thus represented is no mere vehicle or Platonic instrument for the soul; it incarnates spirit, as Christ, His Church, and the Host incarnate God. Shakespeare's metaphorical figures go to eery lengths to show man deeply rooted in a material substrate. Thus Hamlet takes the saying of Genesis and Matthew that man and wife become one flesh as authority for his mocking valediction to Claudius:

HAM.

Farewell, dear Mother.

KING.

Thy loving father, Hamlet.

HAM.

My mother—father and mother is man and wife, man and wife is one flesh, and so, my mother.

(IV.iii.50-53)

Claudius himself imparts a corporeal facticity to the old figure of horseman as Centaur, telling Laertes of a Norman rider who “grew unto his seat” and seemed to have been “incorpsed and deminatured / With the brave beast” (IV.vii.85-88). And Laertes warns his sister not to love the prince because his ambitious mind grows along with his young body and, as lord of the kingdom, he will be “circumscribed / Unto the voice and yielding of that body / Whereof he is the head” (I.iii.22-24).
The body politic is more than a metaphor for social organization in this play; it describes a tightly integrated world where reality stems palpably from the centers of political and religious authority. Francis Barker, describing the public, spectacular quality of *Hamlet* and other Jacobean tragedies, has argued that the abundant corporeal images used in texts of this period were not the “dead metaphors” that they are now, but “indices of a social order in which the body has a central and irreducible place.” “With a clarity now hard to recapture,” he says, “the social plenum is the body of the king, and membership of this anatomy is the deep structural form of all being in the secular realm.”

The extravagant idea, examined by Ernst Kantorowicz three decades ago, that the king in fact has two bodies—his own plus a superbody equivalent to the corporate life of his nation—always threatened to revert to a mystical abstraction, and eventually disappeared from political theory. Discussing its role in *Richard II*, Kantorowicz observed that if the conceit “still has a very real and human meaning today, this is largely due to Shakespeare. It is he who has eternalized that metaphor.”

There is nothing in *Richard II* to match the really astonishing concreteness that the metaphor acquires in one passage of *Hamlet*, when Rosencrantz and Guildenstern accede to Claudius's plan to “dispatch” Hamlet to England:

> We will ourselves provide.
>  
> Most holy and religious fear it is
>  
> To keep those many many bodies safe
>  
> That live and feed upon your Majesty.
>  
> (III.iii.7-10)

Calling up pictures of a bloated insect queen covered by her sucking attendants, or a convocation of politic worms feasting on a corpse, or a communion more literally cannibalistic than most, this violently arresting image locates the king at the dark center of a world dense with material significance. His universal Body, symbolizing religious authority over a commonality, does not hover in some library of legal abstractions, but pulsates with grisly vitality.

The imagery that Shakespeare invents to establish man's corporeality startles most when isolated parts of the body function as metonymic or synecdochical equivalents for actions and states of being. Every audience remembers “The harlot's cheek, beautied with plast'ring art”; Hecuba's “lank and all o'er-teemed loins”; Fortinbras sharking up men “For food and diet to some enterprise / That hath a stomach in't”; Osric complying with his dug before he sucks it; Hamlet beating his brains; and countless similar figures. This usage pervades so much of the play that one can hardly read or hear twenty consecutive lines without encountering it. To maintain the motif's impact in the midst of such copious use, Shakespeare occasionally resorts to violently pressured and improbable images. “Let the candied tongue lick absurd pomp,” says Hamlet to Horatio in an indictment of the flatterer so suggestively lewd that even the compleat courtier might blush to hear it, “And crook the pregnant hinges of the knee / Where thrift may follow fawning” (III.ii.60-62). Shortly afterwards he asks Horatio to watch Claudius carefully, “For I mine eyes will rivet to his face” (l. 85). After this anatomical outrage has been performed upon him, Claudius decides that with Hamlet in Denmark he is not safe from the “Hazard so near's as doth hourly grow / Out of his brows” (III.iii.6-7). In such images, strangely transformed parts of the body—the flatterer's glazed tongue and pregnant knees, Hamlet's bolted eyeballs and malignantly hypertrophic forehead—figure forth morbid states of mind typified in the pursuit of some compelling action.

One thinks of certain punishments in the lower reaches of Dante's *Inferno*: Mohammad's riven trunk fulfilling his schismatic mischief, Ugolino gnawing his enemy's malevolent skull. Indeed, the Ghost hints that, were it not for the intolerable effects that such a tale would have on the living, he could tell of such a treatment of the body's parts in his purgatory: “But this eternal blazon must not be / To ears of flesh and blood” (I.v.21-22).

It has, I believe, never been observed that these images of body parts in *Hamlet* add up to a virtual anatomical catalogue (or, to use the Ghost's grim little joke about dismemberment, “blazon”) of the human form. “Considered curiously,” as curiously as Hamlet considers the dust of Alexander, the play looks like a dissecting room, stocked with all of man's limbs, organs, tissues, and fluids. Certain parts are mentioned
incessantly: eyes, ears, heads, hearts, hands, faces, tongues, brains. These major melodies in the carnal concerto are accompanied by numerous lesser themes. We hear (in varying degrees of frequency) of mouths, noses, lips, cheeks, jaws, teeth, eyelids, foreheads (“brows”), the skin of the head (“pate”), the hair in general, beards, necks, limbs in general, arms, legs, knees, feet, heels, toes, fingers, the thumb, the palm, the wrist, the shoulder, the back, the loins, the breast in general (“bosom”), the mammary organ (Osric's “dug”), genitals in general (“privates”), male genitals (“cock” and the “long purple” flowers whose common name has been euphemized to “dead men's fingers”), female genitals (“country matters”), and the anus (“bunghole”). Of internal organs, there is mention not only of the heart and brain, but also the throat, lungs, stomach, spleen, liver, guts, bones, marrow, nerves, sinews, spinal cord (“pith”), and arteries. Of the fluid products of the body, we hear of blood and tears incessantly, and also of sweat, milk, fat, and gall. The play also refers to various corrupting growths in the body—moles, cankers, warts, ulcers, abscesses, sores, scabs, and “contagious blastments.” Finally, it alludes to such bodily functions as speech, hearing, sight, touch, taste, smell, eating, drinking, chewing, digestion, vomiting, evacuation, sleep, dreaming, hallucination, yawning, weeping, laughing, breathing, copulation, pregnancy, suckling, pulse, disease, fever, death, and decomposition.

More than simply painting a bloody backdrop for his tragedy of revenge, in the manner of Webster, Shakespeare seems to be methodically deconstructing the body. His universal cataloguing of particulars does to the human body what Hamlet tells Osric it would be hard to do to Laertes: “divide him inventorially” (V.ii.114). Like Montaigne, who sought to examine the unknown totality of human experience through its genesis in many particular, irreducible phenomena experienced by the organism, Shakespeare seeks to reduce life to its corporeal elements. His characters in this play think of every psychological quality, every rational deliberation or spiritual choice, in terms of the physical equipment that locates them in a world of action. Claudius's unsuccessful attempt to pray is a good example, demonstrating as it does the limitation of human possibility implied by this procedure. He thinks throughout his soliloquy in corporeal images: the smell of his offense, the blood on his hand, the face of a reprobate and a penitent, “stubborn knees” that will not bow down, a “bosom black as death” hiding a “heart with strings of steel,” and so forth (III.iii.36 ff.). Claudius's “limed soul” reflects conditions of corporeal limitation that Montaigne suggests, at the end of “Raymond Sebond,” man can overcome only through the extension of divine grace:

For to make the handful bigger than the hand, the armful bigger than the arm, and to hope to straddle more than the reach of our legs, is impossible and unnatural. Nor can man raise himself above himself and humanity; for he can see only with his own eyes, and seize only with his own grasp.

He will rise, if God by exception lends him a hand.5

None of the angels whom Claudius begs to “Make assay” offers him an incorporeal hand; caught within the paralytic compound of his heart, hands, brain, face, voice, he looks in vain for a way out of the dwelling that he has made a prison. Nor do any of the other characters in Hamlet find “exceptional” release from their natural condition. In their variously less desperate ways, all struggle against the web of matter that life has woven round them and in which they implicate themselves further every time they act.

Montaigne's challenge, after skeptically weighing the particulars of human experience, was to put them back together in a living totality. Shakespeare's intention appears to be very different. Far from even attempting to present the life of the body as an organically functioning entity, he portrays it more in the manner of Donne's Devotions, as a collection of pieces whose morbidity intimates their ultimate violent dissolution. The play's countless parts and functions, linked with various extreme and unhealthy states of mind, engender a disturbing sense of ontological dislocation. Things fall apart in Hamlet—or are torn apart. Shakespeare does not use the currently popular metaphor of anatomy here (as he does, for instance, for Jaques's lacerating intelligence in As You Like It), but throughout the play we are made to think of the fragmented state of a body that has been cut
open, probed, dissected. When, in the first line of the play, Barnardo inappropriately demands the identity of Francisco, the sentinel he is replacing, Francisco responds, “Nay, answer me. Stand and unfold yourself.” In the claustrophobic heart of Elsinore, the politicians try to make Hamlet stand still so that they can unfold him and find what lies within. Seeing Hamlet's disturbed behavior, Claudius resolves to discover (surgically, as it were) “Whether aught to us unknown afflicts him thus, / That opened lies within our remedy” (II.ii.17-18). Polonius, supposing that he has found the answer, points (according to the commonest editorial reading) to his head and shoulders and says:

Take this from this, if this be otherwise.
If circumstances lead me, I will find
Where truth is hid, though it were hid indeed
Within the center.

(II.ii.156-59)

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, Fortune's privates, who make love to their employment, who would play on Hamlet's stops as on a pipe, reaching for the heart of his mystery, are themselves ground up in their obscene probings, doomed “by their own insinuation” (V.ii.59). The king keeps them, as Hamlet tells Rosencrantz, “like an ape, in the corner of his jaw, first mouthed, to be last swallowed” (IV.ii.19-20). Finally they become inert matter in Hamlet's own perversion of Claudius's plans.

Other insinuations of partition or dismemberment come in reference to “parts” or “pieces,” as in the fragmented lines that open the play. When two more figures enter, Barnardo asks, “What, is Horatio there?” and Horatio answers—perhaps in numbness at the frigid weather, perhaps in disdain for the spooky proceedings, but certainly strangely—“A piece of him” (I.i.19). Laertes, “the continent of what part a gentleman would see” (V.ii.112-13), suffers often from such usages, several of them in the scene in which Claudius reduces him to a tool of his murderous intentions (IV.vii.57 ff.). Laertes agrees to obey Claudius on the condition that “you will not o'errule me to a peace,” and Claudius replies “To thine own peace.” Laertes is content, but wishes it could be arranged “That I might be the organ” of Hamlet's punishment; and Claudius agrees that, of Laertes's courtly “sum of parts,” he will use one “part,” his fencing, to entice Hamlet to his doom. The ideas of incision and partition are combined in the closet scene, where Hamlet's promise not to let Gertrude go until he has made her see her “inmost part” makes her fear that she is literally to be carved up (III.iv.20 ff.). After her hasty exclamation has caused that fate to befall the vigilant Polonius instead, and after Hamlet has thrust his merely verbal daggers in her ears, the queen laments that her heart has been “cleft in twain” and is told, “O, throw away the worser part of it, / And live the purer with the other half” (III.iv.157-59). Hamlet teems with such figures of a body that has been dislocated, broken into its parts. “The time is out of joint” in Denmark, and the young prince has been called upon to plant his foot in the socket and violently “set it right”—an action that involves him in causing still more violation and dislocation.

All this imagery pertaining to the unmaking of the body bears some resemblance to the imagery of the Henry IV plays, which Neil Rhodes discusses in the course of his study of the Elizabethan tradition of isolating and distorting parts of the body for comic and admonitory effects. Food metaphors in particular attach themselves to the person of Falstaff, alternately evoking joyous physicality and miserable corporeal degeneration. A similar emphasis on what Rhodes calls “the mere materiality … of existence” inheres in the somewhat different corporeal metaphors of Hamlet, which derive ultimately from the Ghost who hovers behind the scenes and impels the action. Despite his relatively brief time on stage, the Ghost fills the linguistic fabric of his play with images of broken bodies, much as the fat knight generates images of sensory gratification and discomfort. “Something is rotten in the state of Denmark,” and he symbolizes it. Since Wolfgang Clemen's book on Shakespeare's imagery, it has become a commonplace in Hamlet criticism that the motif of ulcerous infection and corruption that runs throughout the play centers on the speech in which Hamlet is told how poison was poured into his father's ears, coursed through his blood, and ate away his body from within,
covering it with sores. It could be added to Clemen's important observation that the figure of the dead king also organizes corporeal imagery implying dislocation and dissolution. The physical undoing of King Hamlet accounts ultimately—in terms of both the structures of imagery and those of plot—for the physical, psychological, moral, and political undoing suffered by the play's living characters.

As the king was “cut off” (I.v.76) from all that he loved, so Ophelia finds herself, in Claudius's words, “Divided from herself and her fair judgment, / Without the which we are pictures or mere beasts” (IV.v.86-87). Deprived of the coherent form of reason, but still obscurely intelligible, “Her speech is nothing, / Yet the unshaped use of it doth move / The hearers to collection; they yawn at it, / And botch the words up fit to their own thoughts” (IV.v.7-10). Claudius correctly says of this psychic mutilation, “O, this is the poison of deep grief; it springs / All from her father's death” (IV.v.76-77)—just as he discerned earlier that some ruinous “matter” in Hamlet's heart was distorting his appearance and behavior (III.i.165 ff.). Claudius can see that the same psychic recapitulation of King Hamlet's poisoned disfiguration is taking place in Laertes, who “wants not buzzers to infect his ear / With pestilent speeches of his father's death, / Wherein necessity, of matter beggard, / Will nothing stick our person to arraign / In ear and ear” (IV.v.91-95). Noting all these changes, and the political trouble that they are bringing—Hamlet has just been sent to England, “For like the hectic in my blood he rages,” and Laertes is about to burst in upon the inner sanctum of the palace “in a riotous head”—Claudius too succumbs to a feeling of violent psychological disruption. The swelling disaster in his kingdom, he tells Gertrude, “Like to a murd'ring piece, in many places / Gives me superfluous death” (II. 96-97).

In the closet scene, Hamlet analyzes in terms of corporeal disfigurement the moral depravity that reaches out from Claudius to all those who come under his sway. Gertrude's vice appears in her having abandoned the physical arrangement of parts that was King Hamlet—“a combination and a form” that proclaimed manliness—for a demonstrably inferior form (III.iv.56 ff.). “Have you eyes?” Hamlet asks, suggesting that only some physical mutilation could account for such blindness. To choose Claudius indicates not merely sensual weakness, but sensory derangement:

Else could you not have motion, but sure that sense
Is apoplexed …
Eyes without feeling, feeling without sight,
Ears without hands or eyes, smelling sans all,
Or but a sickly part of one true sense
Could not so mope.

(ll. 72-74, 79-82)

Hamlet continues his indictment of Claudius with a comparison to the dismembered body of the dead king. The new ruler of Denmark's government and Gertrude's affections is, he tells the queen, a sum of parts that do not make up a whole, a living body that has already been reduced to fragments: he is “a king of shreds and patches,” “not twentieth part the tithe / Of your precedent lord” (II. 103, 98-99).

The physical imitation of King Hamlet's undoing that culminates in the play's final scene with four deaths by poisoning—five if Horatio could have his way—begins with the death of Polonius, whose corpse is made an emblem of physical decay. After Hamlet has rendered the old courtier “most grave” and lugged his guts offstage, Claudius asks where Hamlet has gone and Gertrude replies, with echoes of dismemberment: “To draw apart the body he hath killed” (IV.i.24). Claudius sends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to “bring the body / Into the chapel” (II. 36-37), but their persistent inquiries are parried by Hamlet, who makes the absent corpse a kind of absent prop for dramatizing the mystery of undoing revealed by his father's ghost:

ROSEN.
What have you done, my lord, with the dead body?

HAM.

Compounded it with dust, whereto 'tis kin.

.....

ROSEN.

My lord, you must tell us where the body is, and go with us to the King.

HAM.

The body is with the King, but the King is not with the body. The King is a thing—

GUILDEN.

A thing, my lord?

HAM.

Of nothing. Bring me to him.

(IV.ii.5-6, 26-31)

The death of kings is the beginning and the end of Hamlet's study in this play. Polonius offers him an imaginative link between the live king who attaches so much importance to bodies and the dead king who knows how little they amount to. Brought before Claudius and asked once more “where the dead body is bestowed,” Hamlet waxes philosophical about kings, beggars, and the worms that consume them both. Considering that even a king, whose mystically double Body represents the corporate being of all his subjects, “may go a progress through the guts of a beggar,” he recites the lesson of the play's corporeal images. The body personal and politic is a provisional structure, both a form that sustains human being and a shadow through which nonbeing beckons. As a composition of parts that will inevitably fall apart and decompose, human life is paradoxically “a thing … of nothing,” an existence constructed around the void.

II

In his famous subtilization of the Romantic idea that Hamlet is unnecessarily and morbidly reflective, T. S. Eliot argued that Shakespeare himself failed in Hamlet to establish any clear correspondence between thought and action, idea and image. The play is “full of some stuff that the writer could not drag to light, contemplate, or manipulate into art,” Eliot suggested; and since nothing in the fictional occasion is sufficient to account for the protagonist's great apprehension and disgust, his thoughts and feelings cannot be expressed by “a skilful accumulation of imagined sensory impressions.” The morbid corporeality of the imagined sensory impressions described in the first section of this essay may provide an answer to Eliot's charge, in that they constitute something like an “objective correlative” for Hamlet's obsessive withdrawal from the world of action. The attitude toward corporeal existence inherent in the play's imagery figures prominently in the protagonist's thinking as well; it contributes to his inability to “act” by challenging what he regards as the integrity of his being.

Insofar as Hamlet suffers from a psychological Problem distinct from the formidable moral and practical difficulties presented by his situation, it consists in questioning his own being; and this in turn has much to do with his inability to identify himself with that which decays, “passing through nature to eternity” (I.ii.73). A
small eternity of dramatic time must pass before Hamlet can think of himself as a creature of flesh without experiencing paroxysms of anguish and disgust. His observation that a king may pass through the guts of a beggar is intended as a thinly veiled threat against Claudius's life, but it attacks also his sense of himself as a dignified, purposeful, heroic being. Fearing that physical actions may never adequately embody virtuous intentions, he makes the doubt self-fulfilling by shielding his high sense of himself within an overwhelming contempt for the body—a contempt that sabotages meaningful action.

Mark Rose has observed how Hamlet is “bound” to certain courses of action by his birth, by his uncle's calculating refusal to let him leave the corrupt “prison” of Denmark, and by his loyalty to the Ghost (“I am bound to hear”; “So art thou to revenge, when thou shalt hear”); he rebels against these constrictions, Rose argues, by becoming “obsessed with the idea of freedom, with the dignity that resides in being master of oneself.” But Hamlet is bound as well to his body, and obsessed with his contempt for it. Even before he is called upon to “set right” the unnatural murder and the incestuous marriage, he laments his connection to the royal couple's physicality. His mother's lascivious “appetite” prompts him to wish for a way out of the hateful body that can lead people to forget so quickly the spiritual goods that have sustained them for a lifetime:

O that this too too sullied flesh would melt,
Thaw, and resolve itself into a dew,
Or that the Everlasting had not fixed
His canon 'gainst self-slaughter.

(I.ii.129-32)

Claudius's rowdy behavior with the boys becomes the occasion for another meditation on corporeal subversion of virtue. Denmark's “heavy-headed revel,” he tells Horatio, has taken “from our achievements … / The pith and marrow of our attribute” (I.iv.17-22)—hollowing out the bones, enervating the spine of a national reputation built up from the achievements of noble Danes. If an irruption of physical impulse can so damage the reputation of an entire nation, it is not surprising that some “vicious mole of nature” or “the o'ergrowth of some complexion” can undermine the reputation of individual men, to such a degree that their virtues “Shall in the general censure take corruption / From that particular fault” (ll. 23-36).

The Ghost calls Hamlet deep into this world of disruption. Its invitation to decapitate the body politic seems a horrific charge (“O cursed spite”), and by the end of the play it will manifestly be so: Ophelia will have been emotionally brutalized and lost to lunatic distraction; the king and queen will have been pierced with hateful insight, their attempts to reconstitute a harmonious political entity shattered; the populace will have been raised to the brink of revolt; Polonius, Rosencrantz, Guildenstern, Ophelia, Gertrude, Laertes, and Hamlet himself will have fallen as more or less innocent victims before Claudius finally does; and Denmark itself will be put in the hands of the reckless young marauder whose hostile approach the sentries anticipated at the beginning of the play. In setting right two injustices, Hamlet will cause physical, psychological, moral, and political dislocations on a universal scale.

Nothing about the apparition gives Hamlet any confidence that the purposeful determination needed to persevere through the play's violence is grounded in substantial, lasting virtue transcending Oresteian futility. On the contrary, the Ghost is simultaneously insubstantial and a horrifying memento of all that rots, seeming to embody the very forces of corporeal ruin that Hamlet fears may be inimical to virtue. It recalls in appearance and dignity the majestic king who won honor destroying the Poles and conquering ambitious Norway. But the Ghost is a weak and ephemeral substitute for the king, referred to by Horatio and the guards as his “image,” “this thing,” “illusion,” “this portentous figure,” a “horrible form,” “a figure like your father,” something “like the King.” Hamlet's astonished prostration before it in the closet scene contrasts with the queen's equally great astonishment that her son is gazing wildly into “vacancy” and holding discourse with “th'incorporeal air” (III.iv.118-19). The Ghost seems very much “a thing of nothing” when Hamlet's appeals
for Gertrude to confirm its existence elicit only fears that her son is a victim of schizophrenic hallucination:

QUEEN.
To whom do you speak this?

HAM. Do you see nothing there?

QUEEN.
Nothing at all, yet all that is I see.

HAM. Nor did you nothing hear?

QUEEN. No, nothing but ourselves.

HAM.
Why, look you there, look how it steals away!
My father, in his habit as he lived!
Look where he goes, even now, out at the portal!

QUEEN.
This is the very coinage of your brain.
This bodiless creation ecstasy
Is very cunning in.

(III.iv.132-40)

Hamlet answers his mother's charge of “ecstasy” convincingly. We cannot believe that the Ghost is a figment of his imagination: Horatio has raised precisely this issue in the first scene of the play, and has been quickly convinced that the apparition is “something more than fantasy” (I.i.54). But Shakespeare's stagecraft makes us feel poignantly how little Hamlet is able to rely on the Ghost as his justification for a murderous course of action. Cast on the defensive, forced to justify the right of a lunatic to catechize a sinner, Hamlet is in no way aided by the encore appearance that the Ghost makes to whet his “almost blunted purpose.”

In addition to being “incorporal,” insubstantial, the Ghost dwells on the terrifying processes by which corporeal creatures are reduced to fragments of themselves. Its first words seem calculated to plunge Hamlet deep into thoughts of undoing. “My hour is almost come, / When I to sulph'rous and tormenting flames / Must render up myself,” it begins, evoking visions of human flesh “rendered” to its elements like animal fat (I.v.2-4). The Ghost may be Hamlet's “father's spirit,” but it is a spirit bound by “foul crimes,” doomed to
wear away by fasting and fire the impurities that it acquired in nature (ll. 9-13). The punishments of its “prison house” are not less intense than what flesh is heir to; in fact, they are so much more intense that hearing of them

Would harrow up thy soul, freeze thy young blood,
Make thy two eyes like stars start from their spheres,
Thy knotted and combined locks to part,
And each particular hair to stand an end
Like quills upon the fearful porpentine.
But this eternal blazon must not be
To ears of flesh and blood.

(ll. 16-22)

The Ghost spares Hamlet the sympathetic undoing that would befall him if he heard this tale of the Almighty's purging fires, but it treats him to the next worst thing, an account of the effects of Claudius's poison. When he is told the manner of his father's death—cut off instantly from life, wife, and crown, with venom coursing through his body, his body congealing and skin crusting, and unrepented sins weighing upon his head—Hamlet hardly requires the Ghost's accompanying injunction: “O, horrible! Most horrible! / If thou hast nature in thee, bear it not” (ll. 80-81). Reeling as beneath a physical blow, he feels that his own body may no longer cohere, no longer support his consciousness: “Hold, hold, my heart, / And you, my sinews, grow not instant old, / But bear me stiffly up” (ll. 93-95).

Earlier, the sight of the Ghost has left Marcellus and Barnardo “distilled / Almost to jelly with the act of fear” (I.i.204-5). The tale of how his father's body sank from admirable beauty to horrifying monstrosity in an instant, and how in the same instant invisible sins overwhelmed his father's soul, plunges Hamlet into a horror as much ontological as physical, into a world where man the effectual ethical agent seems distilled to utter inconsequence. Is ambition a shadow, as Rosencrantz and Guildenstern suggest in a feeble attempt to broach the topic of Hamlet's political intentions? “Then are our beggars bodies, and our monarchs and outstretched heroes the beggars' shadows” (II.ii.267-69). Just as a king's body might be imagined going a passage through the guts of a beggar, his ambitious, “outstretched” spirit may be nothing more lasting than a ghostly shadow. In this world, thoughts may be no more capable of transcending ruin than are bodies. The earth now seems “sterile” to Hamlet, the firmament a morbid exhalation of infectious “vapors,” and godlike man a handful of dust waiting to return to its disorganized state (II.ii). The best things in himself—his fidelity to his father, and the love of Ophelia—are seen now as compromised by the old corrupt “stock” of mankind that virtue can “inoculate” but never supplant (III.i). Linking himself with men such as Claudius—and Ophelia with women such as Gertrude—by the corruptible material in which they are commonly rooted, Hamlet sees virtuous purpose and rational significance threatened everywhere by corporeal corruption.

This perception of bodily experience as corrupt and corrupting drives Hamlet into disdainful, alienated contempt: contempt for his own flesh, contempt for those parts of his experience that seem tainted by corporeality, contempt for people who threaten to harm or to compromise him by insinuating themselves into his thoughts. When Horatio warns him of the possible dangers of following the Ghost, he welcomes the destruction of his body: “Why, what should be the fear? / I do not set my life at a pin's fee, / And for my soul, what can it do to that, / Being a thing immortal as itself?” (I.iv.64-67). Horatio's reasonable reminder that the soul is no more immutable or invulnerable than the body, but may itself be wrecked in madness as it hovers over the abyss, drives Hamlet into what seems to Horatio a “desperate” violence: “Unhand me, gentlemen. / By heaven, I'll make a ghost of him that lets me!” (II. 84-85). This violent withdrawal from his body and from his companions is augmented shortly by withdrawal from his own worldly self. Hamlet imagines that, in order to honor the Ghost's parting command, he must obliterate from memory all the experience and learning stored in his brain, uprooting past impressions until only those of the avenging spirit live there, “Unmix'd with baser matter” (I.v.104). Forsaking for the moment the prudential considerations that his years of “observation”
would suggest to him, and also his trust in his companions, he contents himself with “wild and whirling words,” like a falcon towering high above the earth.

Hamlet's transcendent contempt is dramatized most powerfully in his treatment of Ophelia, the one creature who ties him inextricably, physically, to the corrupt world of Elsinore. His alienation from her begins soon after the encounter with the Ghost. At the end of II.i, she tells Polonius how Hamlet has withdrawn himself in ghostly silence from her society. The antic performance that Polonius takes for “the very ecstasy of love” is indeed ecstatic, though hardly amatory. Hamlet, in Ophelia's description, resembles the literary figure of the distracted and dishevelled lover, but he more strongly evokes the corporeal ruin suggested by the figure of the Ghost. He has entered her room, Ophelia says, in a manner ominous enough to strike terror into her heart, very pale (as the Ghost was said to be), “And with a look so piteous in purport, / As if he had been loosed out of hell / To speak of horrors” (II.i.82-84). Silently scrutinizing the amazed object of his visitation, as the Ghost silently stood before his interlocutors before finally yielding up speech to Hamlet, and three times imitating its action of lifting its head up and down (described by Horatio at I.ii.216), he at last raises “a sigh so piteous and profound / As it did seem to shatter all his bulk / And end his being” (II.i.94-96)—then drifts out of the room without the use of his eyes, they being constantly fixed on Ophelia, as the Ghost’s were said to be on Horatio. In thus affecting the shattering of bulk and ending of being that tore his father from the queen, Hamlet declares his intention to tear himself from his erotic attachment to Ophelia.

A violent attempt to free himself from corporeality, resulting paradoxically in a deep immersion in it, characterizes all of Hamlet's dealings with Ophelia. When he turns his assumed madness upon the unfortunate girl with full force in Act III, he reviles her as a pretty snare for the spirit—one of those creatures who substitute new faces for the ones God gave them, who jig and amble and lisp, who excuse their moral depravity by pleading their rational incapacity—and urges her to take herself out of sexual circulation. The next scene finds him attacking her body with ribald jokes about country matters, lying between maids' legs, and games of show and tell. In thus bitterly doing violence to the creature who most has access to his inner self, Hamlet does not find freedom from the danger of love, but only reduces himself and her to ruin. The deformation of his former self that Ophelia thinks she sees in his harangue—“That unmatched form and feature of blown youth / Blasted with ecstasy” (III.i.160-61)—prefigures her own madness in the next Act. It foretells also Hamlet's distracted expressions of anguish at her death:

'Swounds, show me what thou't do.
Woo't weep? Woo't fight? Woo't fast? Woo't tear thyself?
Woo't drink up eisel? Eat a crocodile?
I'll do't.

(V.i.274-77)

Hamlet finds excessive and violent degradations of his own body the only adequate testimony to the falseness of his earlier contempt. All of his efforts to remove himself from the compromising infection of corporeality only drive him more deeply into the understanding of his dependence on the frail body.

Hamlet's violent, and ultimately futile, ambition to transcend bodily weakness can be seen not only in his dealings with Ophelia, but also in all of his attempts to respond adequately to the death of his father. In his first speech of the play, while manifestly acting the part of a mourner, he disdains dramatic action as being limited by the opacity of the flesh. No physical “show,” he insists, can adequately convey the immensity of his grief. His black clothes and the expressive corporeal actions that accompany them fall short of the indescribable state of suffering that resides within him. Hamlet's separation of “actions that a man might play” and the invisible anguish of his alienated soul is an admission of futility, suggesting that no physical acts—whether dramatic or heroic—can serve the purposes of the spirit. And his words ring false when compared to the authentic alienation of Ophelia, whose mad meanderings and distracted gestures, while
opaque to reason, nevertheless move their audience to anguished commiseration as coherent utterance never could—prompting Laertes to exclaim, “This nothing’s more than matter” (IV.v.174).

The Ghost’s demand for vengeance requires some stronger resort to physicality, and when Hamlet asks the Player for “a passionate speech” he seems briefly to have found a model for “suiting” corporeal action to mental state. He admires the Player's capacity to so translate a fictional intention into dramatic action that all of his corporeal “function” can be seen lending “forms to his conceit” (II.i.561-62). But it soon appears that Hamlet is not chiefly interested in the harmonious suiting of body to soul. Rather, he has asked for the speech in order to excite himself to a still more violent contempt for the body. He imagines that, given the magnitude of his wrong, he should “drown the stage with tears,” “cleave the general ear with horrid speech,” “and amaze indeed / The very faculties of eyes and ears” (ll. 567-71). He fixes obsessively on corporeal excitation as a standard for dramatic and ethical action, contemplating imaginary injuries to his own body in order to work himself up into violence:

Who calls me villain? Breaks my pate across?
Plucks off my beard and blows it in my face?
Tweaks me by the nose? Gives me the lie i' th' throat
As deep as to the lungs? Who does me this?
Ha, ’swounds, I should take it, for it cannot be
But I am pigeon-livered and lack gall
To make oppression bitter, or ere this
I should ha' fatted all the region kites
With this slave's offal. Bloody, bawdy villain!
Remorseless, treacherous, lecherous, kindless villain!
O, vengeance!
Why, what an ass am I!

(ll. 577-89)

Hamlet's bitter self-hatred in these lines stems from his conviction that, in order to act the part of the revenger, he must plunge deep into the bodily passion that he so despises, and perhaps become a bloody villain himself. He quickly abandons the part, determining instead to have other actors enact a play that will determine the king's guilt or innocence.

His instructions to the players correct his bitter contempt for the body, assigning corporeality its due place in dramatic imitation. Renouncing his ecstatic exaggeration of physical violence, Hamlet says, “O, it offends me to the soul to hear a robustious periwig-pated fellow tear a passion to tatters, to very rags, to split the ears of the groundlings” (III.i.8-11). Use the body in your acting, he tells the players, but “Suit the action to the word, the word to the action” (ll. 17-18). He no longer disdains the capacity of bodily actions to execute ethical intentions. The purpose of acting, he says, is to mirror the lineaments of human experience on stage—“to hold as 'twere the mirror up to nature; to show virtue her own feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure” (ll. 21-24). Like a mirror that faithfully receives the physical forms of things, dramatic art takes the bodily impress of men and women and re-presents their moral nature in its living outlines. Hamlet achieves in these prescriptions for art a conception of its ethically effective function, and he manages to implement the conception when he uses other artists' works to probe the psyches of Claudius and Gertrude. The starkly mimetic tableau of courtly bodies played before Claudius literally shows the king the form of his actions, and achieves its intended effect of driving him from cover. The portraits of Gertrude's two husbands engage her conscience with similarly stunning effect, confronting her inescapably with the lineaments of her desires.

But artistic imitations of bodily action do not help Hamlet to accomplish his most important ethical action. He uses the artistic fusion of body and soul, form and intention, to do what art can do according to the
Renaissance aesthetic: convey the intelligible order of experience to an audience and stir their moral responses. He cannot—or will not—use it to accomplish regicide. Indeed, he lets even his “antic disposition” slip before and during the play, with the effect that Claudius understands exactly why the mousetrap has been sprung and determines to remove his enemy from Denmark.

Hamlet's explicit considerations of revenge, like his studies of models of dramatic action, suffer constantly from his ambition to transcend corporeal weakness. By associating heroic action with an escape from the flesh in the “To be or not to be” soliloquy, he initiates a vain attempt to transcend the very conditions of action. He imagines that “taking up arms” will somehow liberate his soul from the indignities of the body. But hearing the story of how his father died has made it impossible for him to imagine the process of leaving the body (so “noble in the mind”) in any terms except those of corporeal calamity. Eternal sleep suggests eternal nightmares. Casting his mind up and out of corporeal misery only leaves him “sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought,” his face drained of “the native hue of resolution” by a consciousness turned pathologically inward. Corporeality drags his heaven-seeking thoughts to earth; like the praying Claudius, he finds them miserably incapable of transcending the limitations of bodily existence.

His effort to draw inspiration from the soldiership of Fortinbras, like his very similar admiration for the Player, loses coherent ethical purpose as it sinks into violent disdain for bodily well-being. The Norwegian adventure against Poland seems to him a case of pathologically morbid violence, an “imposthume of much wealth and peace, / That inward breaks, and shows no cause without / Why the man dies” (IV.iv.27-29). But he forces himself to admire it, because of Fortinbras's eagerness to abandon bodily concerns for the sake of the spirit. His own small sum of bloodshed, he decides, indicates a beast's dull maintenance of corporeal functions, while Fortinbras's admirable “spirit,” his “divine ambition,” appear in his willingness to expose the great “mass” of his army to indiscriminate slaughter. Fortinbras's sacrifice of twenty thousand men for a piece of land not large enough to bury them outpaces in barbarity Laertes's willingness to cut his enemy's throat in the church, and his motives—“a fantasy and trick of fame”—are more insubstantial. Hamlet recognizes the monstrosity of the deed, and even the words that he calls up to defend it betray their ostensible purposes: “Examples gross as earth exhort me” (can such examples be exemplary?); “Rightly to be great / Is not to stir without great argument” (if he is affirming Fortinbras's action, does he not need another “not”?). In yearning to pattern his own revenge on this senseless promotion of catastrophe, Hamlet abandons all realistic consideration of good and evil in an effort to overcome his dull animal maintenance of corporeal life. Instead of deploring Fortinbras's failure to use the body for substantial purposes, he celebrates the way in which he contemptuously smashes it, and thereby entertains thoughts of moral depravity.

In the prayer scene, we see Hamlet caught once more in the division that he would make between body and spirit, and once more cultivating the pathological corruption that he so fears. Seeing Claudius engaged, as he thinks, in “the purging of his soul,” making himself “fit and seasoned for his passage”—whereas his own father died “grossly, full of bread, / With all his crimes broad blown”—Hamlet waits for a moment that will have “no relish of salvation in't,” and leaves Claudius's “physic” to give way to more “sickly days” (III.iii.80-96). An ill-intentioned consulting physician, he judges the alimentary system of the patient sufficiently free of obstruction to permit an unimpeded “passage” of the soul to paradise, and prescribes a period of waiting so that the organism may worsen and clog the hateful soul within it before it is killed. His false assumption that any human soul, much less one so corrupt as Claudius's, could free itself from the conditions of corporeality leads him to seek a barbaric revenge incompatible with Christian virtue, and prevents him from enacting the simpler revenge that lies possible before him. The dramatic irony that Claudius has not been able to transcend his body and the things that it still loves urges the insufficiency of Hamlet's attitudes.

Purposeful action cannot coexist with Hamlet's effort to distinguish the invincible soul from the ruinous body. Such an effort seeks to rescue the self from something that it depends upon for its being and doing. Consciousness in *Hamlet* is, like the body, an entity poised between substantial presence and ephemeral
absence. The body grows and decays according to its own laws; by the same inscrutable laws, men find achievement in the midst of loss, security in the midst of fear, power in weakness, significance in accident. Hamlet defies these laws so long as he attempts to remove the spirit from ambiguity and lodge it in simplicity. Instead of cultivating the compound of kindred elements that is a spirited body, he tries to split it into a duality, and wastes his energy contemning half of himself.

When Hamlet breaks out of his dualism and more confidently treads the stage as a duellist, it is because he has finally acknowledged, without dread or anguish, that princes, like their swords, accomplish their ends in “passing.” A clown’s tricks do not outlive his kicks: not only Yorick's lips have disappeared from the earth, but also his gibes, his gambols, his songs, his flashes of merriment. Nor, by the same token, can Caesar, “that earth which kept the world in awe” (V.i.215), expect to remain a substantial and functional presence, save perhaps as a patch on a windy wall. The great personages who may have owned the graveyard's bones dance again in imagination as creatures who mistook their power for something more substantial than the body, and the fragments of their bodies mock their pretension by outliving them. Gertrude may have forgotten her husband after only two months, but a tanner's flesh is still keeping out water after eight years. As Hamlet persists (despite Horatio's objection) in his courageously reductive meditations on human vanity, he approaches the brash humility of the Gravedigger, who happily shovels aside pieces of bodies as he sings a ditty of age having “shipped me into the land, / As if I had never been such” (V.i.71-74). The rustic's “absolute” use of the terms “man” and “woman” comically relieves the anxiety generated since the beginning of the play by Hamlet's effort to distinguish mankind from corporeality:

HAM.

What man dost thou dig it for?

CLOWN.

For no man, sir.

HAM.

For what woman then?

CLOWN.

For none neither.

HAM.

Who is to be buried in't?

CLOWN.

One that was a woman, sir; but, rest her soul, she's dead.

HAM.

How absolute the knave is!

(ll. 130-36)

Hamlet's taking solace in the provisional “absolute” that men and women are more than their bodies, but not different from them, suggests that he accepts as well the fact that man's strength consists in acceding to
corporeal accidents, rather than in trying to transcend them.

While it is clear that Hamlet adopts a new kind of understanding in Act V, and that he undergoes some beneficial change as a result, criticism has long been notoriously vague about precisely what this saving knowledge consists in. Hamlet does not learn simply to accept death; indeed, he seems always to have desired it. Nor are his words about the “divinity that shapes our ends” and the “special providence in the fall of a sparrow” sufficient foundation on which to base a religious ethic or cosmology. What seems to be on his mind more essentially than either death or God is a preoccupation with the possibilities and conditions of purposeful human action. But even here the understanding seems to be more negative than positive. Hamlet begins to embrace accidental occasions—seeing them under the aspect of Providence rather than Fortune—and to renounce his earlier need to understand and control every aspect of his revenge. Discussing the importance of chance occurrence in the final action, William Warner has recently observed how reluctant the critics of various schools have been to accept limitations on Hamlet's importance, and how they have been driven to ingenious or vague arguments in attempts to rescue his purposeful intentionality.\(^9\) What Hamlet learns, Warner suggests, is precisely the insufficiency of his own attempts to make final and coherent constructions of reality: he learns, in effect, by unlearning what he has thought earlier in the play.

One thing that Hamlet unlearns is his contempt for his physical nature, which has persistently reduced this spirited and capable exemplar of active virtue to acting not at all, or in spurts of blind rage. Hamlet's identity throughout the play has depended upon his wish to exceed the conditions of vulnerability and incompleteness that inhere in an animal body. But reality has repeatedly contradicted this assumed identity, insisting that the body must be central to his being, not something inessential that can be thought into irrelevance and violently discarded. All of Hamlet's efforts to transcend corporeality have only implicated him amorally in its ruinous violence. Finally he abandons the fruitless attempt. He sees in the graveyard not simply the bodily “nothingness” that has so distressed him before, but an inescapable connection between that nothingness and his own being. As James Calderwood has put it, “For Hamlet fully ‘To Be,’ it seems, he must experience in the graveyard, under the tutelage of the Gravemaker, what it is ‘Not To Be.’ For his own identity to crystallize, he must come to the place where all identities dissolve.”\(^11\) The Hamlet who kills the king is a man who has accepted radical limitations on his being, leaving the orchestration of his revenge to Claudius (“I am constant to my purposes; they follow the King's pleasure”), the understanding of his death to God (“Since no man of aught he leaves knows, what is't to leave betimes?”), the telling of his tale to Horatio (“Horatio, I am dead; / Thou livest; report me and my cause aright”), and the continuation of his life to Fortinbras (“He has my dying voice”). In asking forgiveness of Laertes for the imprudent violence that took Polonius's life, he detaches himself—with diplomatic mendacity, but also with evident sincerity—from the arrogant and tormented self that he has been:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{If Hamlet from himself be ta'en away,} \\
\text{And when he's not himself does wrong Laertes,} \\
\text{Then Hamlet does it not, Hamlet denies it.} \\
\text{Who does it then? His madness.}
\end{align*}
\]

(V.ii.236-39)

Hamlet has not in fact killed Polonius in a fit of “madness,” but the word may be taken as a tactful way of referring to an assumed self that has been all but insane. Calderwood calls it a metaphor: “As a metaphor for Hamlet's bond to his father—for that sense in which Hamlet as revenger is ‘possessed’ by the ghost of his father—Hamlet's madness is truly no part of himself, and is in fact ‘poor Hamlet's enemy.’”\(^12\)

Secure in the less ambitious and less anxious self that remains when he has cast out the demon of transcendent power, Hamlet comes into his own as an actor on the national stage, easily and confidently submitting himself to the “pass” of swordplay. He accepts Claudius's invitation to let Laertes's poisonous hand pass into his own:
“Come, Hamlet, come, and take this hand from me” (V.ii.227). His body informs him with sick misgiving that Claudius is arranging his exit from this life, but it assures him at the same moment that he has the physical means to act as he purposes:

HOR.

You will lose this wager, my lord.

HAM.

I do not think so. Since he went into France I have been in continual practice. I shall win at the odds. But thou wouldst not think how ill all's here about my heart. But it is no matter.

(V.ii.211-15)

Hamlet suggests that, in order to act, human beings must accept the fact that their achievements go hand in hand with failure, and find their integrity in the welcoming of fragmentation. Accepting that he will himself sooner or later be “no matter,” Hamlet consents to make up one frangible part in a larger body, as an actor performs one role in a play. In his final words before the cushions and courtiers and daggers and drinks appear—“Let be”—he overcomes the distinction between spiritual fixity and corporeal flux that has plagued him throughout the play. Things will be as they become, his death will come when it arrives, and he can at last leave off his effort to define himself in opposition to what Maynard Mack has called his “imaginative environment.”

Most of Shakespeare's tragedies tell the story of an arrogant man who mistakes his grandiose constructions of reality for reality itself. From Richard II to Coriolanus, his heroes attempt forcefully to impose a deluded conception of reality on the world, and reality brings them down. Hamlet differs from these vain and power-mad men in being adolescent, uncertain, victimized, self-hating. But he shares with them the presumptuousness of believing that he can transcend the laws by which other men and women think and behave. The futility of his attempting to be something other than a body is comically asserted by the madcap ramblings of the Gravedigger; it assumes tragic grandeur in the final catastrophe, as newly ruined bodies litter the stage, awaiting the Gravedigger's services. Having finally consented to act the modest part of the duellist, a disciplined corporeal agent who confines his thoughts to the play of physical circumstances, Hamlet submits with grace and dignity to the limitations of his kind.

Notes

4. The OED identifies the anus as a contemporary figurative sense of “bung-hole,” citing an entry in Cotgrave's Dictionarie of the French and English Tongues (1611) for the cul de cheval or sea anemone: “a small and ouglie fish, or excrescence of the Sea, resembling a mans bung-hole, and called the red Nettle.”
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In the 400 years of Hamlet interpretation, psychoanalysis is a relative newcomer, only a century or so old. During that century, there have been notable shifts in the mode of interpreting the play, both in the critical world at large and in the narrower psychoanalytic world. In part, changes in the psychoanalytic interpretation of the play have had to do with shifts in dominant psychoanalytic paradigms—a process even more striking in the history of interpretation of Oedipus Rex than of Hamlet. In part, however, changes in the dominant mode of literary critical interpretations of the play have set the stage, as it were, for new psychoanalytic approaches.

I would like, in this essay, to review several broad trends in the history of interpretation of the play and to locate within those trends some dominant themes in psychoanalytic interpretation. In that context, I then want to offer my own late-twentieth-century psychoanalytic interpretation—both of Hamlet and Hamlet—based on trauma theory.

My fundamental thesis is that psychoanalytic interpretations, particularly those of individual characters in the play, rely on a long-standing “medical model.” This is most prominent in regard to the question of Hamlet's insanity—whether it is real, feigned, or both. The medical model goes back at least to 1778, according to the New Variorum edition, when a certain Dr. Akenside is said to have been the first physician “to assert that Hamlet's insanity is real” (Furness 1877, 195). Much energy has gone into diagnosing the precise nature of Hamlet's melancholy and Ophelia's madness. Like King Lear and Lady Macbeth, both characters gradually became exemplars of derangement for clinical medicine to the point where a nineteenth-century asylum doctor could write that he had admitted “many Ophelias” to his ward (Showalter 1985, 86).

Apart from illustrating the crossover between the medical and literary (or theatrical) realms, this kind of diagnostic effort is important for my purpose because it tends to locate the problem within the individual. Hamlet, in other words, is thought to be a certain way because that is the way melancholics are. This kind of medical diagnosing shortcircuits literary and social questions, such as how much Hamlet is affected by the external rottenness in Denmark and how much is due to his innate disposition. I suggest that even psychoanalytic interpretations, which in principle can address the interplay between individual temperament and social circumstances, have a propensity for fixing, even freezing, the character into a mold. The moral onus is, as it were, placed on the individual character, and not on the world of other actors and agents who surround him or her. Hamlet's alleged Oedipus complex is thus sufficient to explain Hamlet's problem. But the
risk of this approach is registered both in the play itself when Hamlet attacks Rosenkrantz and Guildenstern for seeking to “pluck out the heart of my mystery” (3.2.355)⁴ and by critics such as Bertrand Russell (1954), who described Hamlet's nightmare as that of being psychoanalyzed. When I come to offer my own formulation about the play and its eponymous hero, I shall propose a theory that is at the crossroads of clinical diagnosis and psychodynamic analysis, while trying to assess the risks and benefits of this approach.

The ensuing highlighting of trends in literary and theatrical analysis of the play is extensively indebted to Gary Taylor's Reinventing Shakespeare (1991). I should preface my remarks by making the obvious disclaimer that they are not intended to be a definitive review. What is more, nothing dies in Hamlet criticism; the same insights found in older paradigms recur under a different guise in the newer paradigms that have apparently superseded them.

During the Restoration and through the mid-eighteenth century, Hamlet was generally interpreted as an unambivalent hero who simply needed to ascertain the facts and decide the best time and place of getting revenge. In Taylor's view, there was a cultural need for such straightforward virtue in response to the turbulent history of the overthrow and restoration of the English monarchy. I would add that audiences sensitive to the consequences of deposing kings would empathize with Hamlet's need for caution in assessing his situation and deciding how to take action. In this perspective, Hamlet feigns madness much as did his “ancestor” Amleth in Saxo Grammaticus or the biblical King David (I Samuel 21:10-14) and the classical Odysseus, solely as a tactical means of evasion or delay the better to achieve his goal.

The second view—that of Hamlet as a hesitater—emerges from early nineteenth-century readings by English critics, preeminently Hazlitt and Coleridge, who were themselves political quietists and not men of action. More or less concurrently, German critics began to “romanticize” Hamlet, emphasizing how too much thought inhibited him from action.⁵ This reading of the play defines the problem taken up by the third paradigm—the Freud-Jones interpretation, which is in large part an attempt to answer the question, “Why does Hamlet delay killing Claudius, when he could have done it so much sooner?”

Freud and later Jones provided several versions of Hamlet as instantiating the idea of unconscious conflict over what (by 1910) Freud would term “the Oedipus complex.” As everyone now knows, this theory holds that he is inhibited by unconscious guilt over his patricidal and incestuous wishes, which in part also explains his melancholia. These formulations enhanced the prominence of sexuality in both literary and theatrical interpretations of the play. Contemporaneous social changes gave an impetus to franker discussion of—and perhaps even preoccupation with—“sex” in the colloquial sense (Taylor 1991, 260-62). Freud, and to a greater extent Jones, tied their oedipal interpretations to Shakespeare himself, augmenting longstanding critical speculation about the ways in which Hamlet the character and Hamlet the play could be seen as autobiographical emanations.

Several prominent literary critics, who did not necessarily buy the Freud-Jones approach, gave some legitimacy to the search for covert reasons for Hamlet's delay (as well as the connections between Hamlet's psyche and Shakespeare's). John Dover Wilson concluded What Happens in Hamlet (1935) by confessing that he did not know what happens in Hamlet! T. S. Eliot wrote in “Hamlet and His Problems”: “We must simply admit that here Shakespeare tackled a problem which proved too much for him. Why he tackled it at all is an insoluble puzzle, under compulsion of what experience he attempted to express the inexpressibly horrible, we cannot even know. … We should have to understand things about Shakespeare which Shakespeare did not understand himself” (1919, 126). And Caroline Spurgeon buttressed her study of Shakespeare's imagery by appealing to psychoanalysis: “the repeated evidence of clusters of certain associated ideas in the poet's mind … throws a curious light on what I suppose the psychoanalyst would call 'complexes,' … things and ideas which are linked together in Shakespeare's unconscious mind, and some of which are undoubtedly the outcome of an experience, a sight or an emotion which has profoundly affected him” (quoted in Taylor 1991, 263). Norman Holland's Psychoanalysis and Shakespeare elegantly summarized the analytic literature using
this paradigm: “Curiously, the nonpsychoanalytic critics give us a lead in this direction. Despite their differing preoccupations, a single thread ran through their readings: in Hamlet, inner impulses are given outer expression. … [T]he defensive maneuver that permeates the language, character, and events of the play is projection” (1964, 203). Holland likewise reviewed the essays presenting the oedipal and preoedipal configurations, splittings, doublings, and triplings, and multiple representations of fathers, sons, and women thrown into relief by ego psychological approaches.

The fourth major paradigm shift, beginning in the 1930s and led by William Empson's Seven Types of Ambiguity (1936), was the literary and cultural focus on irony and ambiguity as well as on distorted or interrupted narration. These trends heightened the tendency to analyze the play, Hamlet, rather than the character of Hamlet. The so-called “new criticism” derided the Romantic view of characters as though they were real persons (Knights 1933). The relation of the play to Shakespeare's life became less a matter of his psychology than of his career in the theater. Literary critics stressed the “indecipherability” of the play. As David Bevington wrote, “It is appropriate that for modern critics Hamlet should be Shakespeare's greatest dramatic enigma, for misunderstanding is the unavoidable condition of Hamlet's quest for certainties” (1968, 1).

This literary paradigm facilitated various psychoanalytic interpretations that focussed on doubling, ambiguity, and the lack of a clear boundary between sanity, feigned madness, and genuine madness. Both Lacan's (1959) reading and to some extent Stanley Cavell's (1987) fit in here. The problem of “representation” became more prominent (Green 1983). These later psychoanalytic readings built on the earlier ones, but provided a fresh approach to the play and openly addressed (Eissler 1971) whether the problem was with the play or the character or both.

The fifth and last paradigm I would like to suggest is that of “Hamlet and trauma.” In part, the cultural matrix of literature and trauma arises from the twentieth-century experiences of the Holocaust, atomic destruction, as well as colonial, racial, and sexual oppression. Even more profoundly than formal criticism, literature depicts the damage done by trauma to its victims. Toni Morrison's Beloved (1987) is justly one of the most celebrated of such explorations. Psychological and political analyses have gone hand in glove in anatomizing individual and collective “traumatic stress syndromes.” Psychoanalysis owes its current awareness of the significance of real-life trauma at least as much to movements outside the field (notably, the growing public awareness of child and domestic abuse, as well as of the horrors of the Holocaust and the Vietnam war) as it does to any internal developments.

The trauma view that I now wish to develop at greater length shares with new criticism the premise that the “uninterpretability” of Hamlet constitutes a central problem, although it treats it in a very different way. It ventures at least a partial explanation of how and why the play is replete with themes of misunderstanding and why it obscures, reverses, and lays traps that leave not only its characters but also its readers in doubt and indecision. It is not accidental, as Harold Bloom has commented, that the history of Hamlet criticism is filled with “misreadings, many highly creative in themselves” (1998, 407). The trauma perspective also addresses the psychoanalytic question of how to conceptualize the interaction between the external reality portrayed in the play and the internal reality (and perceptions) of each character.

The title of an important book on the long-term impact of childhood trauma, Shattered Assumptions (Janoff-Bulman 1992; see also Herman 1992), captures the essence of the model I shall use as a framework for this discussion. The shattered assumptions in trauma include that one can trust those nearest and dearest, and that one can count on the stability of the ground beneath one's feet (shaken metaphorically in instances of intrafamilial betrayal, and literally in natural disasters such as earthquakes). The “container,” the potential space in which one lives, no longer holds. Interpretation of events becomes constricted or chaotic or both. Numbness (cf. Macbeth's reaction to the news of Lady Macbeth's death) oscillates with lability and incomplete control of one's emotions. One of the main effects of trauma is a difficulty in deciding whether
what is going on is real; there is a defensive oscillation between “This couldn't possibly be true” and “Oh, my God, if this is true, then my whole world is shattered.” Trauma breaks apart the intricate linkage between “logical relationship” and “human relationship,” as I have argued with respect to the “nonsense” in King Lear and the ridiculing of logic in Beckett's plays. The self and the world become loathsome, and a profound mistrust of the future sets in. In the effort to master a trauma, the quest for revenge and a scapegoat are commonly seen behaviors. In Hamlet, the main scapegoats are women and Hamlet himself.

It has been well established that a sense of unreality is a pervasive response to massive trauma. A child victimized by her father's sexual abuse may report how she takes herself psychically out of the room or watches the scene from a distance. A woman who as a child survived several years in a Nazi death camp later came upon one of her drawings in an exhibition about the Holocaust. Her response was, “So it really happened, it wasn't a dream after all.”

Although multiple effects ensue in the wake of severe trauma, several discrete syndromes have been identified, most notably “post-traumatic stress disorder” (PTSD). But clinicians have come to appreciate that someone may be profoundly affected by trauma without having PTSD. With reference to Hamlet, a better term for capturing the plight of the characters is “complex traumatic stress syndrome” (Herman 1992), which signifies that the traumatic events are not entirely in the past. Even the term “traumatic event” can be an oversimplification. All the facets of an event must be taken into account to gauge a person's reaction. One consistent finding has been that the secrecy associated with a trauma is especially devastating. Even a child who is not being seduced but who knows about and is terrified of revealing what is happening to a sibling in the family may well experience difficulties in concentrating and appear lost in reverie. This state can be accompanied inwardly by severe doubts about what is real and what is not. Coerced vows of secrecy combined with confusion about fact and fantasy often lead to incomplete or fragmented narratives. It has been understood in psychoanalysis almost from the beginning that a story that cannot be told directly in narrative discourse finds expression through displacement, symbolization, and action, as Freud spelled out in “Remembering, Repeating, and Working Through” (1914). Work with victims of severe trauma highlights how it may be impossible to put parts of the story into words at all. These memories will then be experienced nonverbally, encoded, perhaps, as bodily experiences. “Dissociation” comes closer than “repression” to describing the variety of ways that knowledge becomes confused and disavowed in traumatic states.

The question of “real” vs. “feigned” madness in Hamlet can be recast as an offshoot of the larger problem, “what is real and what is fantasy?” Hamlet's madness, however one chooses to regard it, is contiguous with the punning, doubling, delaying, and deception of the play. For virtually every character, deception of others goes hand in glove with self-deception. The scenes of madness—real for Ophelia, equivocal for Hamlet—are equivalent to dreams inserted into the text of a narrative that become switch-points for actions leading in unforeseen directions. Ophelia's madness closes off and summarizes the action more than it redirects it, but does the latter to some extent as well.

Shakespeare makes Hamlet's madness a question for all the characters in the play—including Hamlet himself—and shows how each one gives an explanation commensurate with his or her self-interest, but does not really know. Polonius believes that it is true madness and caused by love-sickness. Gertrude believes that it is true madness and due to the “o'er hasty marriage.” She later changes her mind (partially) during the “bedroom” scene when Hamlet insists that she not tell the king that he is feigning madness, but rather report that he is truly mad. Insofar as Ophelia believes that Hamlet is truly mad, she can feel less rejected in love (and perhaps less defective), but in the face of his hostility, she does not know for sure. Claudius sends Guildenstern and Rosenkrantz to find out either the cause of his madness or indeed whether it is real, but because he knows that he has killed Hamlet's father, he suspects strongly that Hamlet's madness is feigned to disguise his knowledge. But Claudius seems also to entertain the possibility that Hamlet is intermittently mad and that something dangerous is hatching beneath the brooding melancholy.
Hamlet, the character, is severely traumatized by the Ghost's recollections, leaving him, as it were, both certain and uncertain that his father was killed by his uncle as well as of his mother's collusion with him or, at least, of her betrayal of the memory of her recently deceased husband. His encounter with the Ghost is replete with imagery of spatial dislocation (the dizzying height), shaking of fundamental beliefs (the Ghost rumbles from beneath the ground), and frantic attempts to regain stability and certainty (Hamlet forces Horatio and Marcellus to take an oath not to tell what they've seen or hint that Hamlet is feigning madness). He moves them from place to place and the oath includes the phrase *hic et ubique*, “here and everywhere.”

Hamlet's melancholy, by his own lights, is wholly real—in 1.2 he has not heard about or seen the Ghost—but upon being traumatized by the Ghost's revelations, his strategy is to feign madness. There is more continuity between his genuine melancholy and the “antic disposition” than he himself can acknowledge.

One could further speculate that Hamlet's initial melancholy is a response not only to the “o'er hasty marriage” but also to the secrecy and lies perpetrated by Claudius and the feeling that he is being used. His gradual awareness that Ophelia too is being used (whether with or without her consent he cannot be sure) augments his sense of betrayal and anger, perhaps pushing him farther than he can control. In short, Hamlet's feigned madness is a symptom of the “feigning” and deceit around him, but he is intermittently more unhinged than he realizes or wishes to be. His apology to Laertes in 5.2 that his madness, not he himself, was responsible for his rash actions (killing Polonius, cruelty to Ophelia) is not merely an attempt at exculpation, but represents Hamlet's own struggle to distinguish real from feigned madness. His “antic disposition” cannot be separated from his “objective” uncertainty about whether or not Claudius actually murdered his brother, an uncertainty that is seemingly resolved after the play-within-the-play. But it is not entirely removed for the audience (or perhaps even for Hamlet) until we hear Claudius confessing his crime in an aborted prayer for forgiveness.

The dramaturgic consequences of Ophelia's madness have been less closely examined than have those of Hamlet's. Is the audience sufficiently prepared for her breakdown to see it as plausible? The groundwork is laid in part by the way that *Ophelia's feelings are consistently ignored and she is silenced*. A striking example occurs at the end of her terrible scene with Hamlet, after he has cursed and denounced her, when her father says to her: “You need not tell us what Lord Hamlet said, / We heard it all” (3.1.175-76). Hence her madness is focussed on her *speaking* in such a way that she cannot be ignored. When, after learning of Polonius's death and the secrecy surrounding it, she wants to see Gertrude, Gertrude at first demurs, “I will not speak with her” (4.5.1). Only in her madness does anybody begin to listen to Ophelia!

Ophelia has been used as bait by her father and Claudius (with Gertrude's tacit agreement), and she is attacked by Hamlet in part because he discovers her role in the trap set for him. Her trauma is characterized by a web of half-truths, paternal attempts to deny her perceptions, and the secrecy attending the murder and “hugger mugger” burial of Polonius. This web, combined with the fact that the man she has loved killed the father she also loved, as well as the impossibility of any kind of open grieving or raging—let alone discussion—contribute to her breakdown. As trauma theory teaches us, the secrecy and extreme difficulty of telling what has gone on are no less damaging than is the actual deed (e.g., incestuous abuse of the child).

Another way of looking at the traumas that drive Ophelia to madness is that, with the death of her father and absence of her brother, she has lost male protection (Claudius being of dubious value in that regard) and has no standing as an unmarried woman. With Hamlet's madness, cruelty, exile, and possible death, she is deprived of a husband. He has, moreover, been looking not for a wife but for someone with whom he can beget the “child” revenge. Ophelia is unsuitable in this regard, for she is too close to Polonius and Claudius-Gertrude. His attack on her in the “get thee to a Nunnery” scene (3.1) is caused in part by his anger at finding her wanting as a partner in his plot against the king to avenge his father's murder.

Trauma likewise disturbs the sense of reality, leading to processes of disavowal or disconnection, in the sexual domain. Both the ghost of Hamlet's father and Hamlet himself reproach Claudius (and Gertrude) for being “incestuous” and “adulterous.” Yet neither the play nor Hamlet the character is entirely clear whether
Gertrude and Claudius slept together before the death of Hamlet's father. (A similar ambiguity hovers over whether or not Hamlet and Ophelia have slept together, as her mad songs [4.5] suggest.) Even the definition of “incestuous” is a problem since Elizabethan law considered the marriage of a woman to her deceased husband's brother to be incestuous, but no characters in the play (other than the two Hamlets) seem to notice this. Lisa Jardine (1996) argues that, notwithstanding the ecclesiastical codes posted in every parish, Elizabethans in practice often countenanced such unions, especially if the heir of the deceased brother did not lose his property as a result. This disinherition was technically an “offence,” which explains Hamlet's bitterly ironic exclamation, “No offence in the world!” (3.2.214). Claudius announces that Hamlet remains heir to the throne, and therefore he has ostensibly not lost his property. Jardine's analysis helps us to understand why the Elizabethan audience would not necessarily have reacted with horror or outrage at the union of Claudius and Gertrude. But is it only Hamlet, obsessed with his mother's sexuality, who fixates on the theme of incest; or do the other characters need to ignore or deny it?

Who, in short, is traumatized and therefore responding with denial, confusion, and uncertainty about what is real and what is fantasy? The most obvious answer, of course, is Hamlet, followed by Ophelia, and probably Gertrude. But the entire play exudes the aura of a traumatized environment. We, in the audience, must in turn live with a discomfiting set of ambiguities, awaiting further clarification, which comes only partially by the end of the play. Granted, we learn that the Ghost told the truth about having been murdered by Claudius, his brother. But we do not know for sure whether there was any complicity, direct or indirect, on the part of Gertrude or whether the Ghost's account of the method of his murder can be believed (Cavell 1987). We likewise do not know whether the union of Gertrude and Claudius was indeed incestuous or whether Hamlet was only feigning madness. Nor can we expect that Horatio's promise at the close, “All this I can / Truly deliver” (5.2.363-64), will answer all these questions.

The theme of a story that can be told only incompletely or deceptively runs like a red thread throughout the play. Both classical psychoanalytic theory and trauma theory emphasize the indirect telling of that which cannot be remembered or safely told. Hamlet cannot say publicly that what he has heard from the Ghost has horrified him and is enough to drive him crazy. He therefore appears to Ophelia after encountering the Ghost “with a look so piteous in purport / As if he had been loosed out of hell / To speak of horrors” (2.1.81-83). Ophelia cannot say how distraught, how used, how furious, and how negated she has been; so she sings in her mad ditties about the death of her father and the death of her love for and from Hamlet. Hamlet's imparting to Horatio how he will resort to the play-within-a-play to coerce Claudius to reveal involuntarily what crimes he has committed, “If his occulted guilt / Do not itself unkennel in one speech” (3.2.70-72), is a way of filling in the hitherto unspeakable.

Accordingly, the ending of the play tolls with the word “tell” (and its analogues) in a last-ditch effort to represent and restore the broken narrative that constitutes the tragic action. The dying Hamlet proclaims:

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You that look pale and tremble at this chance,
That are but mutes and audience to this act,
Had I but time, as this fell sergeant Death
Is strict in his arrest, O I could tell you—
But let it be, Horatio, I am dead:
Thou livest; report me and my cause aright
To the unsatisfied.
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(5.3.312-18)

He pleads with Horatio not to commit suicide: “If thou didst ever hold me in thy heart, / Absent thee from felicity awhile, / And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain, / To tell my story” (325-28). He prophesies that Fortinbras will become king: “He has my dying voice, / So tell him, with th'occurrences, more and less, / Which have solicited—the rest is silence” (335-37). In response, Horatio offers to “speak to th'tyet unknowing
world, / How these things came about. … / … All this can I / Truly deliver” (358-59, 363-64). In a tragedy, however, there cannot be complete resolution. Even if Horatio knew all there was to tell (but he doesn't, and Hamlet instructs him to speak only “more and less”), Fortinbras wants no more than an abbreviated version of the story, enough to legitimize his taking of the throne, “Let us haste to hear it” (365).

Since trauma involves broken narrative, it is appropriate to conclude by wondering what a view of Hamlet from the perspective of trauma leaves unanswered. The ultimate challenge is to account for the greatness of the play, the way it has captured “center stage” in the history not only of English language and literature but in the consciousness of the world as well. In my admittedly limited reading of the literary, theatrical, and psychoanalytic criticism, I have not found a satisfactory—let alone compelling—account of that achievement; and I do not claim that my own “trauma approach” has succeeded where others have failed.

But it may be a start to pose a somewhat narrower question: how to understand Hamlet's transformation in mood and tone so that he comes by Act 5 to possess a calm reflectiveness (Kerrigan 1994; Bloom 1998, 429-31)? The indices of Hamlet's change include the cessation of his attacks on femininity and sexuality as well as the absence of soliloquies. To convince the audience that such an evolution has taken place is a theatrical challenge for the actor playing Hamlet. What can a trauma perspective offer? Bearing in mind my earlier warning that “diagnoses” of character run the risk of freezing the character into a “type” and thereby not allowing for transformation, I must admit that an emphasis on trauma could be counterproductive. Unless “diagnosis” includes the possibility of psychic change, it hypostasizes, remains static.

Over the decades, there has been a development in the trauma literature itself away from diagnostic categories, such as “shell shock,” to a greater sense of the openendedness in an individual's response to trauma. Although the process of change is clearly of central concern to anyone seeking to treat trauma victims (Herman 1992), there has in general been much more attention paid to the deleterious effects of trauma than to the remarkable healing and transformations that can take place. Some who have been victims of devastating traumas attain a sort of transcendence, often marked by forgiveness (or a different attitude toward vengeance), that is at once awe-inspiring and seemingly unimaginable to the rest of us. This might be thought of as a reframing of categories. Questions of good and evil, intentionality and chance, remain important, but they do not carry the same emotional weight that they did earlier in the person's life.

A suggestion—and it is only that—that I find helpful in continuing to draw an analogy between the clinical and dramatic experiences of trauma comes from Dan Jacobson, who proposes that great literature transforms and transcends the categories by which both the audience and the characters formerly lived. “Works like Hamlet,” he writes, “subvert the distinctions we ordinarily make between conscious and unconscious intentions, between manifest and latent content, even between language and the material world” (1989, 271). I would add that, by the end of Hamlet, our sense of what constitutes activity and passivity, acceptance and revenge, forgiveness and blame, mourning and melancholia—all these have been not so much intellectually altered as emotionally moved into a different orbit. I believe that good psychoanalysis also helps an individual to transcend and transform the categories with which he or she came into treatment. It remains for me an open question how successfully psychoanalytic explanations of Hamlet can address the transformations that take place in the course of the play. At the moment, I stand in awe and gratitude.

Notes

1. While I have not seen this trend documented for Oedipus Rex, my own experience in reading psychoanalytic essays on the play reveals how interpretations have shifted over the decades from seeing it as illustrating first the child's Oedipus complex, next counteroedipal impulses, then the dynamics of adoption, and finally Oedipus as an abused child.

2. In addition, there has been a crossfertilization (or, some would say, a crosscontamination) between mainstream literary and psychoanalytic modes, most notably in Lawrence Olivier's 1948 film version,
which was very much influenced by the Freud-Jones view of the play.

3. Forty small-print pages of Volume 2 of the New Variorum Hamlet are taken up with a collection of opinions—including that of Isaac Ray, the nineteenth-century American psychiatrist involved in both asylum work and forensics—as to whether Hamlet's madness is real or feigned. The earliest discussion cited (1877, 235) is that of Aaron Hill around 1745. Oscar Wilde has quipped that the real problem of Hamlet is whether the critics are really mad or only feigning.


5. See, however, the caution of Harold Bloom: “In our overenthusiastic embrace of the Romantic Hamlet, the hero of hesitation who dominates criticism from Goethe and Hazlitt through Emerson and Carlyle, and on to A. C. Bradley and Harold Goddard, we have been too ready to lose our apprehension of Hamlet's permanent strangeness, his continued uniqueness despite all his imitators” (1998, 412).

6. See the issues of American Imago edited by Cathy Caruth (1991) devoted to on psychoanalytic approaches to understanding the connection between literature and trauma as well as the paper in this journal by Greenberg (1998).

7. I have elsewhere (1988a, 1988b) developed these ideas on trauma in relation especially to modern drama, such as the works of Beckett, Ionesco, and Pirandello; but they can also be utilized with Hamlet, in some ways a quintessentially “modern” drama. To make a speculative leap, I would also see much of the impetus for “postmodern” and deconstructionist criticism as a response to the collective traumas of the twentieth century.

8. As many critics have noted, in the Quarto Gertrude clearly asserts “I did not murther him,” but in the Folio, Gertrude's response (3.4.29ff.) to the accusation, “Kill a king and marry his brother,” is one of surprise and not definite denial.

9. A partial exception is Gertrude's speech to Ophelia (3.1.38-42), where she expressed distress on Ophelia's behalf; but she is still primarily concerned with Hamlet's well-being. In some ways, this presages her speech to the dead Ophelia, which is again full of tenderness but casts her too much as Hamlet's bride. On Ophelia as bait, see Lacan (1959).

10. A further sign of change can perhaps be found in the ambiguity about Hamlet's age. In Act 5, he is definitely said to be thirty years old; but for much of the play he appears, at least to modern readers, to be considerably younger. It is as if he has matured with remarkable celerity in the course of the play.

References


**Criticism: Production Reviews: John P. McCombe (review date 1997)**

[In the following review, McCombe assesses Franco Zeffirelli's 1990 film production of Hamlet, starring Mel Gibson as Hamlet and Glenn Close as Gertrude. McCombe faults the production for its overemphasis on the dysfunctional bond between Hamlet and Gertrude, and notes that the film fails to fully explore the political elements of the play, such as the corruption of the Danish court.]

It is a disheartening comment on the current state of Shakespeare in Hollywood that many productions undermine the ambiguities which make his plays so readily available to interpretive criticism. One such example is the 1990 film version of Hamlet, directed by Franco Zeffirelli. Like many representations of Shakespeare on film, Zeffirelli carefully edits the play to adhere to what Hollywood believes to be the approximately two-hour attention span of the cinema patron. In the process, Hamlet becomes less a tale of political corruption in the Danish court and, instead, more closely resembles a dysfunctional family melodrama. Hamlet successfully occupies both positions at once.

Because the affairs of state have been de-emphasized, Zeffirelli's Hamlet does not have to reconcile the demands of his position as Crown Prince with his personal desire to avenge his father's murder. For centuries, critics have asked, "Why does Hamlet hesitate to take action and kill his usurping uncle?" The failure to answer that question in any definitive manner has led to volumes of critical response and countless stage and film adaptations of Hamlet. The 1990 Hamlet links Hamlet's hesitancy to his unnaturally strong bond with his mother, Gertrude. This interpretive tradition seems to have begun in the 1940s and culminated in a series of lectures about Hamlet by Jacques Lacan in 1959. Lacan's and Zeffirelli's Hamlets are far less complex than Shakespeare's play would suggest. In addition, the 1990 film essentially strips the play of many ambiguities which make it such a labyrinth of conflicting desires. Before examining Zeffirelli's representation of the mother-son bond in Hamlet, it may prove helpful to consider some other ways in which Hamlet reduces the complexity of meaning in the Shakespeare play.

The first significant omission of the play's narrative occurs at the beginning of the film, where we witness the burial of Hamlet's father. Zeffirelli eliminates any mention of the father's reign, or of the King's heroic battle with Fortinbras of Norway. At the beginning of the play, Horatio narrates the elder Hamlet's victory over Fortinbras and the subsequent seizure of Norwegian lands (I.i.79-107). As a result, Shakespeare's play opens with the threat of an impending invasion of Denmark by the son of Fortinbras. Thus, Zeffirelli's film excludes important narrative elements of the play, such as "tales of the Norwegian and Pollack wars, the presence of young Fortinbras, a going and coming of ambassadors and the threat of a popular insurrection" (Wilson 27). In Hamlet, the atmosphere at court is marked by everpresent spying. By contrast, Hamlet omits the political significance of the surveillance within the Danish court; the film fails to connect the eyes that constantly monitor Hamlet's machinations with the more general atmosphere of espionage that looms over the Danish state. Zeffirelli cuts the scene in which Polonius sends Reynaldo to monitor Laertes's actions in France, where Polonius advises, "With windlasses and with assays of bias, / By indirections find directions out" (II.i.65-66). Such an omission never disrupts the course of the narrative but it does reduce the level of espionage to a strictly personal one, and lessens the importance of espionage at the state level. In Hamlet, the espionage exists on both personal and political levels. The Denmark of the senior Hamlet's reign was a military state, characterized by the heroic hand-to-hand combat of the father. Undoubtedly, Shakespeare intended his portrait of the current espionage state of the younger Hamlet's Denmark to comment upon a similar trend within Elizabethan society. The tragic consequences at the conclusion of Shakespeare's play reveal that the "new" Denmark pales in comparison with the heroic age of Hamlet's father.

The end of Hamlet is similarly de-politicized. Zeffirelli concludes his film with an aerial shot of the dead bodies of Hamlet, Claudius, Laertes and Gertrude strewn about the floor of the castle. In the text of the play, the deaths of the central characters are accompanied by the arrival of young Fortinbras, who will assume the
leadership of the Danish state. In fact, in Shakespeare's play, Hamlet's dying words reveal that his final wish is for a return to the type of military state led by his father. Hamlet believes that the accession which has been denied him by the usurping Claudius will now fall to young Fortinbras: “I cannot live to hear the news from England. / But I do prophesy th' election lights / On Fortinbras. He has my dying voice” (V.ii.355-57). Zeffirelli's omission of these lines from the film subsequently eliminates the suggestion of Hamlet's concern for the welfare of the state.

Shakespeare's Hamlet suffers disappointment on both the personal and political levels. He agonizes over his personal relationships with Gertrude, Ophelia, and his uncle, but also suffers because his family has been an embarrassment to Elsinore. The heroic era of Hamlet's father's reign has been reduced to the corrupt, espionage state of his uncle. In Shakespeare's day, “the whole social structure seemed to depend upon the dignity and integrity of the royal house” (Wilson 49). By play's end, Hamlet recognizes that the son of his father's enemy, young Fortinbras, may provide the necessary political and civic stability required for the good of the Danish people. Throughout Hamlet, Hamlet must weigh his personal motive for revenge against the benefits of inaction; it may be that Hamlet considers whether the state, as a whole, might benefit more if the Royal family, with the usurping Claudius as King, retains power and stability. In other words, Hamlet's loyalties are divided. He feels obligated to the dead King as both a political father and a paternal father, but the duties to the two fathers are often directly opposed. Unfortunately, Zeffirelli's Hamlet reveals no such conflict of desire for Hamlet because we never think of him as motivated by any sense of political obligation. Later, it will be evident that the film overemphasizes the importance of the mother/son relationship as the mitigating factor for Hamlet's hesitation to kill his uncle.

An important example of ambiguity within Shakespeare's play is Hamlet's “antic disposition.” Again, the film oversimplifies the range of Hamlet's desires and motivations. Hamlet reduces the uncertainty that a theater audience might experience as it attempts to distinguish between Hamlet's feigned madness (the “antic behavior”) and instances of genuine emotional distress. Zeffirelli's Hamlet never appears distressed. The Prince is omniscient and overhears nearly every plan to test his sanity or to observe his behavior. As a result, the film Hamlet is always a performer on stage and knowingly considers whether or not his behavior is appropriate for his particular audience. In Zeffirelli's version of the “nunnery scene,” Hamlet has observed Claudius and Polonius as they prepare to eavesdrop on himself and Ophelia. Hamlet watches the shadows of the two men and appears to address his uncle and Polonius, rather than Ophelia, who is ostensibly his sole auditor. Another Zeffirelli embellishment is the scene in which Polonius advises Ophelia to resist the tenders of Hamlet. Despite no supporting evidence in the Shakespearean text, the Prince secretly overhears the plan. In the film, we witness the wordless encounter of Hamlet and Ophelia in the sewing room (II.i.77-120), but must attribute Hamlet's behavior to a feigned madness; there is no suggestion that Hamlet is sincerely troubled by the change in his affection for Ophelia. Hamlet has simply overheard Polonius's instruction for Ophelia to reject him and believes that the decision to do so was not Ophelia's wish. The Prince is merely playing the role of a crazed and rejected lover, since he is aware that his response will be under scrutiny. In contrast, J. Dover Wilson suggests that one of the principal reasons for the “antic behavior” in the play is that Hamlet is unable to prevent its occurrence. In the sewing room scene, Wilson writes that,

to suppose that Shakespeare intended … to represent play-acting on Hamlet's part is absurd. In “sore distraction” of spirit Hamlet instinctively turns for support to the only being left who might give it him. She fails; and the “piteous” sigh shows that he realizes her failure, and that all is over between them. Thus, she has rejected his love, and proved unresponsive to an appeal of extreme need.

(112)

Wilson suggests that Hamlet's “antic disposition” also provides two other significant benefits; Hamlet's “madness” allows him to stall for time while he decides whether to avenge his father. Wilson also suggests
that the antic behavior “gives him a freedom of speech and action he could not otherwise obtain” (93). Zeffirelli’s omniscient Hamlet does demonstrate Wilson’s latter two explanations for Hamlet’s madness, but the notion of Hamlet’s genuine emotional distress is conspicuously absent. One could argue, however, that Zeffirelli’s insistence that Hamlet feigns madness in this scene is far from what Wilson would describe as an “absurd” misreading of Shakespeare’s intention. Instead, Zeffirelli frequently undermines the strength of the bond between Hamlet and Ophelia and consequently strengthens the ties between Gertrude and the Prince. Thus, Zeffirelli’s Hamlet is neither burdened by his duty to the state nor bound by any significant affection for Ophelia. The absence of these two possible desires reduces the complexity of Hamlet’s motivations in the film. Once again, the filmmaker disregards the array of ambiguities in the play and focuses on the desire between mother and son.

Hamlet frequently invites its audience to consider multiple layers of meaning. Even within the text of the play, the characters frequently doubt the truth of what they see and hear and question the meaning of events. Hamlet’s “enigmatic” letter to Ophelia provides one obvious example:

Doubt thou the stars are fire, Doubt that the sun doth move; Doubt truth to be a liar, But never doubt that I love.

(II.ii.116-19)

Hamlet reminds Ophelia that appearances can be deceptive and that, despite his outward behavior, he sincerely loves her. Another example of Hamlet’s deceptive outward behavior occurs at the performance of the traveling players, which provides one of the most problematic scenes in the play.

Zeffirelli’s representation of this scene again reduces the possible levels of meaning in Hamlet. This is another instance in which the filmmaker's editing choices focus our attention upon Hamlet and away from the supporting characters, who play important roles as audience members during the performance of “The Mousetrap.” This detracts from the complexity and depth which the play’s text invites as the viewer considers how a host of different characters respond to the lines spoken during the “play within the play.” For example, Zeffirelli omits the following lines which have a special resonance for Ophelia, as well as for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern:

For 'tis a question left us yet to prove, Whether love lead fortune, or else fortune love. The great man down, you mark his favorite flies; The poor advanced makes friends of enemies; And hitherto doth love on fortune tend, For who not needs shall never lack a friend; And who in want a hollow friend doth try, Directly seasons him his enemy.

(III.ii.208-15)

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern have been esteemed friends of Hamlet's since childhood but they, like Ophelia, have forgotten their allegiance to the Prince and have allowed themselves to be used by Claudius as bait to uncover the source of Hamlet's discontent. Here, Shakespeare uses “The Mousetrap” to meditate on the nature of loyalty and friendship, but Zeffirelli seems intent on diminishing the roles of the supporting players and has omitted these important lines.

During “The Mousetrap.” there is one very brief shot which reminds Zeffirelli’s audience that the most important relationship in Hamlet is the one between Gertrude and Hamlet. When Hamlet suggests to his Mother that Polonius's daughter is “metal more attractive,” and that he chooses to sit next to Ophelia, Gertrude flashes him an expression of bitter jealousy; Gertrude, not Ophelia, is the wounded lover. Within the play, Shakespeare suggests that Hamlet sincerely loves his mother but Zeffirelli constantly reinforces an unmistakably physical bond between the two. This extends their relationship into the realm of an Oedipal.
struggle, beyond the strength of the relationship as suggested by Shakespeare.

To attempt some sort of explanation of the mother/son bond in Hamlet, one can compare Zeffirelli's reading to one of Hamlet's most memorable critical interpretations. In his essay, "Hamlet and his Problems," T.S. Eliot explains why Hamlet was one of Shakespeare's most unsuccessful tragedies:

The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an “objective correlative”; in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked.

(124-25)

Here, Eliot suggests that Hamlet's emotions are in excess of the facts as they appear. Eliot believed that a successful tragedy, such as Macbeth, provides us with two specific examples of an objective correlative:

the state of mind of Lady Macbeth walking in her sleep has been communicated to you by a skillful accumulation of imagined sensory impressions; the words of Macbeth on hearing of his wife's death strike us as if, given the sequence of events, these words were automatically released by the last event in the series. The artistic “inevitability” lies in this complete adequacy of the external to the emotion; and this is precisely what is deficient in Hamlet.

(125)

If, today, readers are unsure of just what Eliot is trying to articulate in his essay, the important point is that Eliot raises questions about Hamlet's motivation and the source of his desire, questions which continue to bewilder anyone who produces the play. Whether or not Hamlet's actions are excessive is not the concern of this paper (and J. Dover Wilson certainly addresses this issue). What is clear, however, is that Zeffirelli appears to agree with Eliot's line of reasoning and believes it necessary to amplify the strength of the mother/son relationship to Oedipal proportions. Such a narrative revision tips the balance of Hamlet's desires; the obligation to avenge his father's death is no longer beset by an array of opposing desires. Shakespeare's Hamlet yearns for stability within the state, while weighing the conflicting desire of his rightful inheritance. At the same time, the Prince must protect his mother from the horrible realities of his father's murder. As evidence of a massively reduced complexity, the Hamlet of Zeffirelli's film simply seeks to satisfy his mother's desires.

Zeffirelli clearly displays, perhaps unconsciously, a debt to the Hamlet lectures of Jacques Lacan. Lacan uses Hamlet as an illustration of his psychoanalytic theories, which is, at once, both a fascinating demonstration of his somewhat esoteric theories and a reductive interpretation of the play. "Hamlet's drama,” writes Lacan, “is the drama of a man who has lost the way of his desire” (12). According to Lacanian psychoanalytic theories, Hamlet's desire for his mother has been banished from the conscious to the unconscious, the result of the passage of the subject from the realm of Lacan's “imaginary” to his “symbolic” stage. The defining moment of this passage is Freud's Oedipal struggle, an event in which the father forever separates the child from the mother's body by establishing the social taboo on incest. Hamlet's unconscious desire is for his mother, Gertrude, the definition of the Lacanian “Other.” Any example of the hero's conscious desires constitutes what Lacan designates as the “object little a,” which is a mere substitute object for the desire of the “Other.” For Lacan, the “object little a” is the position occupied by Ophelia. In fact, Lacan writes that after the confrontation between Hamlet and Ophelia in the sewing room (recounted by Ophelia in Act II, Scene 1), “Ophelia is … completely null and dissolved as a love object” (22). By subscribing to Lacan's theory of desire in Hamlet, the complex web of ambiguities is obviously becoming increasingly simplified.
In attempting to explicate a Lacanian interpretation of Hamlet's desire Slavoj Zizek writes,

And what prevents Hamlet from acting, from accomplishing the imposed revenge, is precisely the confrontation with the “Che Vuoi?” of the desire of the Other: the key scene of the whole drama is the long dialogue between Hamlet and his mother, in which he is seized by doubt as to his mother's desire—What does she really want? What if she really enjoys her filthy, promiscuous relationship with his uncle? Hamlet is therefore hindered not by indecision as to his own desire; it is not that “he doesn't know what he really wants”—he knows that very clearly: he wants to revenge his father—what hinders him is doubt concerning the “desire of the other,” the confrontation of a certain “Che Vuoi?” which announces the abyss of some terrible, filthy enjoyment.

(120-21)

Zeffirelli certainly shares Zizek's conception of a sexually omnivorous Gertrude. Although Zizek is ostensibly writing about Shakespeare's play, it appears as if he and Zeffirelli possess an almost identical conception of the function of desire in Hamlet. Zeffirelli's film visually and narratively re-emphasizes the mother/son desire at every opportunity. In such an adaptation of Hamlet (Zeffirelli practically begs for a psychoanalytic reading of his film), Hamlet's actions are never in excess of the facts as they appear in this lurid, family melodrama; T.S. Eliot might even find the film version to be a successful restoration of Shakespeare's tragedy, since the objective correlative has been adequately established.

Zeffirelli's adaptation was not the first Hamlet to be criticized within a psychoanalytic discourse. In fact, Julia Reinhard Lupton and Kenneth Reinhard consider that, “On first glance Zeffirelli's version looks like a weak repetition of Olivier's classically Freudian rendition (1948), with the overdrawn self-consciousness of Britain's knight of culture replaced by the fast draw of the American action movie (Mel Gibson) and the easy sleaze of the erotic thriller (Glenn Close)” (83). However, the forty years which separate the two films provide the opportunity to shift from a Freudian perspective in an analysis of the Olivier film to a Lacanian perspective in Zeffirelli's film:

Olivier's Hamlet tenderly returns the affections of his mother in a forties-Freudian reading that emphasizes Gertrude as the object of Hamlet's incestuous desire. Zeffirelli's production, on the other hand, places the mother as the Other of demand: at once overanxious and oversexed, Gertrude's hungry kisses and caresses are resisted with barely concealed disgust by her son. … As Lacan writes of Hamlet, “It's not his desire for his mother (pour sa mere), but rather his mother's desire (de sa mere) that's in question,” a distinction that measures out the difference between the “classical” Freudian reading and its postclassical repetition.

(Lupton and Reinhard 83)

Certainly, the representation of Gertrude as a “desiring machine” in Hamlet would provide a more than adequate “objective correlative” for critics like Eliot. Considering that Gertrude's open displays of affection for Claudius, as well as for Hamlet, are rendered through constant displays of touching and caressing, Zeffirelli reinforces the notion of Hamlet's disgust with his mother's open sexuality. The visual evidence of such sexuality is overwhelming in Zeffirelli's film and includes these representative examples: 1) Claudius and Gertrude embrace before requesting that Hamlet not return to Wittenberg; 2) before Gertrude's appeal, “And let thine eye look like a friend on Denmark,” Gertrude touches Hamlet's face and the Prince turns away; 3) Gertrude and Claudius hold hands at the banquet where “The King doth wake tonight and takes his rouse”; 4) following the Ghost's departure, and during the speech beginning, “Frailty thy name is woman,” Hamlet observes Claudius and Gertrude hugging before the fireplace. These instances occur early and often in the film, emphasizing Gertrude's sexuality and, more significantly, a physical bond between mother and son.
which has existed for quite some time.

How does Zeffirelli’s Hamlet (and the film audience) interpret this excessive display of Gertrude’s sexuality? One refreshingly non-psychoanalytic critical approach (although no less problematic) has been proposed by William Van Watson, which might fall under the rubric of queer theory. The failure of the Zeffirelli Hamlet, as Van Watson sees it, is that the director banishes his homosexuality to the closet in both his personal life and his films. Thus, one reading of Hamlet is that the film “offers Zeffirelli the opportunity of transferring his reactive focus from homophobia to its phallocentric corollary, misogyny. To this end, (the director) privileges Gertrude, editing her role far less than he does the parts of either Claudius or Horatio” (320). In other words, Van Watson believes that homosexual desire is thwarted in Hamlet; the suggestion of a homosexual bond between Hamlet and Horatio, or between Hamlet and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, is resisted. There are at least two major problems with such a reading. First, although Hamlet seems less affectionate with the common men of the Danish court (particularly in his exchange with the soldiers in Act 1, Scene 2), there is a strong suggestion of a physical bond between Hamlet and Horatio. The best evidence appears in Hamlet’s death scene. Van Watson writes, “Zeffirelli’s closing shot shows Hamlet lying alone on the floor, Horatio seated far enough away from him so as not to touch him” (320). In reality, Hamlet does die in Horatio's arms on screen, revealing no homophobic fear of contact between the two friends and conforming to a very traditional rendering of the death scene. The second problem with the theory of misdirected homophobia is that Van Watson does not develop the supposed corollary between homophobia and misogyny. Van Watson considers Hamlet's cry, “Frailty thy name is woman,” to be the evidence of a misogynistic impulse, resulting from the transfer of homophobic energies into misogyny. It seems more likely that Hamlet's anger is, instead, related to the notion of “this too too sullied flesh,” or, in other words, to the disgust that Hamlet feels with the suggestion of his mother's hasty and incestuous marriage. Later, it should prove helpful to return to Shakespeare's concern with incest and the full implications with regard to Hamlet's behavior.

Van Watson correctly identifies the presence of the unnaturally strong mother-son bond in Hamlet, but demonstrates little evidence of a connection to repressed homosexual desire. The question remains, “Why do Eliot and others feel that Hamlet's actions are in excess of the facts as they appear?” The answer to that question lies in the fact that adaptations such as Zeffirelli’s frequently disrupt the context of Hamlet by stripping the play of its political dimensions and thus reducing the possible layers of meaning. Without the threat of the Fortinbras invasion and without the atmosphere of political espionage, Hamlet can too easily be reduced to the level of family melodrama. However, even without these elements, J. Dover Wilson argues that a little knowledge of the dynamics of the Renaissance family and the definition of incest, as understood by Shakespeare, offers a plausible and sufficient explanation for Hamlet's strange behavior. In other words, doesn't the “objective correlative” simply lie in the notion of the “too too sullied flesh” of Act I, Scene 2?

Hamlet reveals the depth of his disgust for his mother's “incestuous” marriage before he encounters the ghost of his father. Denmark's was an elective monarchy, so Hamlet would not have automatically assumed the throne after the death of his father. Hamlet has been bypassed as the successor to the throne by his uncle, Claudius. Still, this is not what torments him at the beginning of the play: his mother has married “a beast that wants discourse of reason” and, more important, “O, most wicked speed, to post, / With such dexterity to incestuous sheets” (I.ii.150-56)! Canon law considered marriage with a deceased brother's widow to be incestuous. And Hamlet is the flesh of his mother's flesh, so his disgust is equally directed at himself. Hamlet's flesh has been “sullied” or soiled because his mother has wedded his uncle and taken to the “couch of luxury” which so plagues his thoughts. J. Dover Wilson is quick to point out that, “This incest business is so important that it is scarcely possible to make too much of it” (43). A sufficient illustration of the objective correlative may exist in the fact that Hamlet was simply an example of Castiglione's Renaissance courtier (Jones 109). Hamlet may be unable to act because he must weigh the revenge of his uncle against the salvation of his mother. Instead of an Oedipal desire for his mother, Hamlet might alternately battle against his desire for Gertrude's salvation and his distaste for her hasty marriage. Although Hamlet never explicitly states this concern, Shakespeare nevertheless invites the viewer to entertain this possibility among the many
After the appearance of the Ghost, Hamlet's dilemma is compounded: to kill Claudius too soon would reflect badly on Gertrude, who had married Claudius so soon after the death of the King. His mother may even have been implicated in the murder of Hamlet's father. Hamlet wishes to protect his mother's name at the same time that he is repulsed by her incestuous marriage. During the first two acts, Hamlet must convince himself that the Ghost is reliable. The two important points to be established are that Claudius was the usurper and that Gertrude was indeed unaware of the murder plot. The performance of “The Mousetrap” helps to convince Hamlet of the former and the confrontation in Gertrude's bedchamber reassures Hamlet of the latter.

Zeffirelli's film recasts Act 3, Scene 4, as a confrontation with a bizarre and inappropriate, erotic style. In the play, Hamlet addresses his mother with a tone of accusation and anger, reiterating the theme of incest:

QUEEN:

Have you forgot me?

HAMLET:

No, by the rood not so! You are the Queen, your husband's brother's wife, And, would it were not so, you are my mother.

(III.iv. 14-17)

The scene, as rendered by Zeffirelli, is well described by Van Watson as “the most warmly lit scene in the film,” taking place in “an intimate space whose thick walls and heavy draperies create a scene of privacy” (320). To reinforce the over-embellished bond between Zeffirelli’s mother/son, the director punctuates the scene with a full-mouthed kiss between Hamlet and Gertrude and some conspicuous thrusting as the Prince lies on top of his mother. Shakespeare's play does suggest that Gertrude feels physically threatened by Hamlet in the bedchamber; Hamlet is testing his mother's knowledge of the murder of his father. Much like the antic disposition, Hamlet seems suspended between the role of accuser that he plays and the genuine repugnance that he feels for Gertrude's “sullied flesh.” The audience of Shakespeare's play should understand these complex feelings. So why does Zeffirelli imagine that his audience requires a sexually jealous and unhinged Hamlet or a devouring Gertrude to justify the behavioral excesses of either? The answer is obviously related to any interpretation of Hamlet in which the reader believes that Hamlet's actions are “in excess of the facts as they appear.”

To summarize the wide breadth of critical approaches to Hamlet introduced in this paper is truly difficult. One can only conclude that a psychoanalytical reading, to which Zeffirelli's film absolutely lends itself, ultimately suggests some moral or psychological failing on Hamlet's part that is the invention of the play's interpreters and not supported by Shakespeare's text. Instead, Hamlet's “indecision” seems a product of the mutability of the human condition itself, which is linked to the conflicting notions of duty, desire, and love that confront Hamlet at different moments in the play. By stripping Hamlet of its political context and by reducing the array of ambiguities at the core of the narrative, Zeffirelli presents us with a Hamlet in which there are material explanations for Hamlet's behavior which should not be clear to either Hamlet or to the audience who observes his inevitable downfall. The Lacanian mechanism of mother/son desire that drives Zeffirelli's film might provide an excellent illustration of Eliot's troublesome “objective correlative,” but it also produces a Hamlet in which the explanation for the characters' motives for fear and desire comes more easily than Shakespeare probably intended.

Notes
1. The reader should note that the lines “Get thee to a nunnery” (III.i. 121-31) do not actually appear in the film’s “nunnery scene.” Instead, they are reserved for the subsequent “Mousetrap” scene. Zeffirelli considers the nunnery speech to be sincere and not consistent with Hamlet’s “antic behavior” before Polonius and Claudius. Therefore, Hamlet must speak the lines at a moment of intimacy with Ophelia. This provides us with evidence that Zeffirelli considers the antic behavior as completely within Hamlet's control and that Hamlet never alternates between feigned madness and actual emotional anxiety. In other words, Zeffirelli's Hamlet is far more omniscient but far less complex and far less interesting.

2. For an interesting Freudian psychoanalytic discussion of Hamlet's anger and repression, see Jones, especially chapter four, pages 97-103. Again, however, I would resist explaining Hamlet's problem as a strictly psychoneurotic disorder as Jones attempts to do.

Works Cited


Criticism: Production Reviews: Samuel Crowl (review date 1998)


[In the following review, Crowl examines Franco Zeffirelli's 1990 film version of Hamlet, starring Mel Gibson as Hamlet and Glenn Close as Gertrude. Crowl praises Zeffirelli’s casting, textual editing, and exploitation of cinematic space and landscape, and claims that the film offers a full exploration of the play as a family romance centered around Gertrude.]

Franco Zeffirelli, the maker of the most commercially successful of all Shakespeare films, has received paradoxically less critical attention than any of the other major directors of Shakespeare films. Olivier, Welles, Kurosawa, Kozintsev, and Branagh all have found their work at the center of scrutiny in the growing body of critical literature devoted to Shakespeare on film. But not Zeffirelli. Of the six books which appeared between 1988 and 1992, and which constituted a mini-explosion of critical interest in Shakespeare as a subject for film, only one, Peter Donaldson's Shakespearean Films/Shakespearean Directors, contained an extended analysis of a Zeffirelli film.¹ He was ignored by the others, as he was by Charles Eckert’s pioneering collection of essays on Shakespearean films which appeared in 1972 just four years after the release of
Zeffirelli's *Romeo and Juliet.* Only Jack Jorgens, in his groundbreaking *Shakespeare on Film* (1977), gave Zeffirelli his due with chapters devoted both to *Taming of the Shrew* and *Romeo and Juliet.* Recent collections, *Shakespeare and the Moving Image* (1994) and *Shakespeare, The Movie* (1997), have tried to restore the balance somewhat by including omnibus essays on Zeffirelli's Shakespeare films, but even they are measured in their assessment of his achievement. The attention paid to Kenneth Branagh's work may lead, as Robert Hapgood suggests, to renewed interest in Zeffirelli's as Branagh's flamboyant realism is so obviously indebted to Zeffirelli's lush and energetic film style.

Why has Zeffirelli's work been so generally ignored or discounted by Shakespeare on film scholars? His *Taming*, so obviously a vehicle for its famous stars, Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton, did not transcend their limitations and appeared just at a moment when modern feminism was suggesting a host of alternative approaches to the play beyond treating it as broad, battle-of-the-sexes, farce. Jorgens is right to see that the film's most innovative moments are its opening scenes with Lucentio and Tranio arriving in Padua just as the city breaks into festive swirl and abuse, as the university students celebrate the first day of the new term. Zeffirelli's frame clearly wishes to reimagine the play's farce as participating in the festive, holiday atmosphere of Shakespeare's major romantic comedies. But Cassius to the contrary, the fault is sometimes in our stars and Burton and Taylor fail to transcend the quasiautobiographical impulses which led them to this Shakespearean project.

*Romeo and Juliet,* perhaps, suffered from the opposite fate. Here was a film so bold and stunning, which immediately found and held its teenage audience, that critical analysis was largely superfluous. This film, at least until Donaldson's suggestive essay, didn't need interpreters—it spoke directly and powerfully to students by passing the Shakespeare establishment. Zeffirelli's film reflected the 1960s in romanticizing the passion, intensity, and beauty of the young destroyed by the quarrels and conflicts of their parents. The film became the first to reshape the teaching of Shakespeare in the American high-school English curriculum. For almost seventy-five years *Julius Caesar* and *Macbeth* topped the list of the ten most taught Shakespeare plays—a list on which *Romeo and Juliet* did not appear. By 1975 *Romeo and Juliet* had leapt to the top of that list where it has remained, sustained by countless replays of Zeffirelli's film, for the past twenty-five years. So the film's immense popularity and its association, at least in America, with the high school curriculum were perhaps two reasons for its critical neglect.

One might have expected that the huge financial success of Zeffirelli's *Romeo and Juliet* (1968) would have created the commercial atmosphere conducive to the making of more Shakespeare films, but the failure of Polanski's *Macbeth* (1971) to recapture and extend the young audience Zeffirelli's *Romeo and Juliet* had found doomed the genre for almost two decades until the advent of the Branagh revolution. Though the planning for Zeffirelli's film of *Hamlet* (1990) long predated the release of Branagh's *Henry V* in 1989, the surprising success of Branagh's low-budget film certainly helped pave the way for Zeffirelli's return to screen Shakespeare after an absence of almost twenty-five years.

Though some commentators feel that *Hamlet* presented the romantic Italian with a world less congenial than *Taming's* Padua or *Romeo's* Verona (“One cannot move from his Padua and Verona to his Elsinore without a feeling of sensory deprivation,” Robert Hapgood perceptively remarks), Zeffirelli's fascination and involvement with the play reaches back to his emergence as a major director for the stage. In fact the first Shakespeare he directed after the remarkable success of his production of *Romeo and Juliet* for the Old Vic in 1960, was a prize-winning Italian version of *Hamlet* with Giorgio Albertazzi, which went on tour to Paris, Vienna, Moscow, and London in the summer of 1964. That stage production was sandwiched between several operas he was also directing including Joan Sutherland in *I puritani* and Maria Callas in *Norma:* “This was the spring of both my divas,” Zeffirelli comments in his autobiography reminding us that his first *Hamlet* sprang to life in the midst of his work with two of the greatest divas of the age—one just emerging, the other beginning her decline.
When, years later, Zeffirelli came to film his *Hamlet* most attention was given to his casting of Mel Gibson, known primarily for his lead roles in the *Mad Max* and *Lethal Weapon* action films, and to Gibson's eventual performance as Hamlet. Because of Gibson, most responses to Zeffirelli's film sought to place it firmly in the film culture of its star. I do not quarrel with that approach but believe that the casting of Glenn Close and Zeffirelli's passion for the opera diva exerted as strong an influence on many of his production decisions which is why, visually, Gertrude emerges at the center of the film. Zeffirelli's visual interpretation of the play makes an intriguing match with Janet Adelman's Gertrude-centered reading of the play in her *Suffocating Mothers: Fantasies of Maternal Origins in Shakespeare's Plays,* “Hamlet” to “The Tempest,” which appeared in 1992 just after the release of Zeffirelli's film.

Adelman locates the reintroduction of the mother (in general) and Gertrude (in specific) into the Shakespearean universe as initiating the tragic phase of his career. The successful negotiations with masculine legacy and female sexuality which Shakespeare dramatized in the Lancastrian tetralogy and the comedies—plays noted for their absence of mothers—collapse in Shakespeare's tragedies where female sexuality intrudes upon and ruptures masculine identity. For Adelman, Hamlet initiates this tragic pattern and Gertrude is at its core:

> Hamlet thus redefines the son's position between two fathers by relocating it in relation to an indiscriminately sexual maternal body that threatens to annihilate the distinction between the fathers and hence problematizes the son's paternal identification. At the same time, the play conflates the beloved with this betraying mother, undoing the strategies that had enabled marriage in the comedies. The intrusion of the adulterous mother thus disables the solutions of history and comedy as Shakespeare has imagined them; in that sense, her presence initiates tragedy.9

After establishing shots of castle and courtyard, Zeffirelli's *Hamlet* begins with a sob and a dumb show which silently and decisively answers the text's opening query: “Who's there?” The camera pokes its way down into the castle's crypt where we discover ourselves at Old Hamlet's entombment. Our first close-up is of Glenn Close's Gertrude, whose pale, sobbing face is wreathed by thick blonde braids, followed by quick cuts to Alan Bates's fleshy Claudius and Paul Scofield's silent king. Gertrude approaches the coffin and removes a pewter rose from her hair and places it on Scofield's chest and then turns and collapses into Polonius's waiting arms. This misty interlude is shattered as a fist, clutching a handful of dust, enters the frame and slowly opens to allow the dirt to sprinkle down on the corpse. The camera follows up from hand to arm to capture the hooded face of Mel Gibson's Hamlet just as Claudius speaks the first lines of the film script: “Hamlet think of us / As of a father, for let the world take note / You are the most immediate to our throne.”

As Gertrude's sobs mix with the film score's violins, Hamlet turns and exits. This tableau establishes Zeffirelli's decision to focus on *Hamlet* as a family romance, to place Gertrude firmly at its center, to compete extravagantly with Olivier's Oedipal version of the play, and to offer a *Hamlet* defined more by that fistful of dust than by thinking too precisely on the event.

Gibson's presence as Hamlet has made comparisons with his work in the *Lethal Weapon* and *Mad Max* films inevitable, and Linda Charnes is right to see that the characters he played in those films share with Hamlet personalities made mad by marriages.10 I am less convinced, however, by her desire to see Glenn Close's Gertrude as a combination of her good-bad girl roles in films like *The Big Chill* and *Fatal Attraction.* For Zeffirelli, Gibson walks out of film culture, but his context for Close is opera. Gertrude is conceived as the film's diva, she is the golden girl at the center of a drab masculine world. Zeffirelli's camera adores Close and repeatedly captures her glowing girliness. Opera is, of course, as uncongenial a medium for *Hamlet* as are the *Mad Max* and *Lethal Weapon* films but in the visual tension between the two, played out in Zeffirelli's direction of Gibson's and Close's performances, the film generates an excitement in translating the play into a mixture of the artistic conventions which have governed Zeffirelli's professional life as a director and designer.
The poet, Wayne Koestenbaum, has written an extended rhapsody on the opera queen, *The Queen's Throat: Opera, Homosexuality and the Mystery of Desire,* which explores gay fascination with opera in general and the diva in particular. While the communion between opera queen and diva is largely conducted by listening in the dark with the diva's throat and voice as the medium of ecstasy and thrill, Koestenbaum's text often and naturally links the diva with the female film star from Gloria Swanson to Julie Andrews: “Callas sang in the era of *Sunset Boulevard:* in legend she became Norma Desmond.” He also understands that not all opera queens worship from afar and in the dark:

In a photograph, Visconti wraps his arms tightly around Callas and kisses her on the cheek—it looks to be a firm, authentic kiss—and she smiles, flattered and gratified to be kissed; Zeffirelli, doughy and devoted, kisses Callas, and she smiles radiantly, knowing the limits of the kiss; Bernstein holds Callas's hands and studies her, and they seem to be playing a seesaw game, figuring out whether their bodies are equivalent; gaunt and shirtless, Pasolini directs Callas as Medea, and she is attentive, obediently holding her hands to her face. These photographs attest to a specific historic configuration: the gay man venerating the theatrical woman and the woman responding gaily, the woman imitating the gay man and the gay man imitating the woman, the man and woman collaborating.

A composite of those photographs showing Visconti, Zeffirelli, Bernstein, and Pasolini all giving rapt attention to Callas might serve as an analogue to the ways in which Zeffirelli surrounds Glenn Close's Gertrude with her quartet of male admirers—Scofield's Ghost, Gibson's Hamlet, Bates's Claudius, and Holm's Polonius. The analogy breaks down, of course, because of the differences in the mystery of desire contained in the two tableaux. Close's Gertrude “smiles radiantly,” is “flattered and gratified to be kissed,” and wants to respond “gaily” to the men in her life. The problem is that they are not her director and do not know, especially Hamlet, the “limits of the kiss.”

Zeffirelli's film keeps flirting with imagining Gertrude as the diva who, in the world of opera, releases her dazzle but keeps her distance with and through her voice. Shakespeare's queen is, however, as much body as voice and her physical presence seems to demand intimacy rather than devotion.

Zeffirelli's film, like Adelman's critical analysis, shapes the play with Gertrude at its center, or at the center of Hamlet's fractured consciousness, rather than the ghost or Claudius. The film is much more about sons and mothers than fathers and uncles, which is evident not only from the opening dumb show but in Zeffirelli's casting decisions as well. Close and Gibson are of an age; Scofield's Ghost is ancient and old enough to be Gertrude's grandfather and while, by comparison, Alan Bates's Claudius appears much younger than his brother, he is still almost old enough to be Close's father. Helena Bonham Carter's Ophelia (with eyebrows wonderfully sullen and defiant) is never a visual match for Gibson's Hamlet; she is out of his “star” not because of social standing but because she can't compare or compete with his dazzling mother. She's a plain, puzzled child; Close is the film's radiant golden girl and Gibson's Hamlet naturally (and unnaturally) finds it impossible to “step from this picture [Gertrude] to this [Ophelia].” The predominant visual image of Zeffirelli's *Hamlet* is of the pale blonde Close dressed in virgin blue, shot in golden light, surrounded by a host of swarthy, hairy males all dressed in drab colors. Even Ophelia's dress and coloring align her with the men rather than with the glamorous queen.

Everyone in the film is fascinated by her. Anthony Dawson intelligently sees that “the gesture that seems to define Franco Zeffirelli's vision of the play is the glance. The camera moves, bodies move, but more than anything in his films, eyes move.” And, from the opening dumb show, those glances are directed as much at Gertrude as at Hamlet. She is the center of the male gaze and female gaze as well, as Carter's Ophelia repeatedly is found by the camera giving Close her puzzled scrutiny as if to say: what has she done to my man and how can I tap into that power?
Father is as absorbed as daughter. Ian Holm's Polonius is clearly captivated by Gertrude. From his move to
comfort the weeping queen in the opening scene, to his report of Hamlet's and Ophelia's romantic relationship,
to his preparation of Gertrude for Hamlet's arrival in the closet scene, Holm is more solicitous of Gertrude's
opinion than of Claudius's. Holm's performance is subtle and meticulous. His Polonius is more the scholar (or
pedant, note his cap) than the statesman and his windy announcement of the Hamlet/Ophelia relationship is as
much to Gertrude as to Claudius. Zeffirelli repeatedly places her at the center of attention. The play insists that
it is Claudius who has usurped the center (“popp'd in between the election and my hopes”) which rightfully
belongs to Hamlet, but here Alan Bates's Claudius seems just another male admirer of Gertrude's radiance. It
is clear that his Claudius has murdered more for lust than power, but he appears shy and almost overwhelmed
by his prize rather than proudly possessive.

Zeffirelli's shift of the play's family power dynamics is made most clear in his handling of the film's version of
1.2. As we have seen, he lifts a snippet of it as the first spoken dialog in the film's opening scene. He cuts
from the crypt to the court with elements of Claudius's opening address heard first as a general announcement
(over an establishing shot of Elsinore's castle) and then from Claudius himself enthroned alongside his queen
in the castle's great hall. Hamlet is absent from Claudius's slick congratulations to the court for their reception
of funeral and wedding. He has to be sought out and it is Gertrude who leads the search party. She nuzzles
Claudius into accompanying her to Hamlet's room shrouded in darkness and filled with books and
rudimentary scientific equipment. She swings open a giant curtain exposing her son, certain that she is a light
and life bringer. She laughs amusedly at Hamlet's crack about being “too much in the sun,” having literalized
his pun and missed its sting. Close's Gertrude tries to soothe her son in the same manner she handles
Claudius—with nuzzles and tender touches and kisses which become increasingly complicated and
ambiguous. Here when Hamlet sinks to the floor on his capitulation, “I shall in all my best obey you, madam”
Gertrude goes to his knees to kiss his forehead, eyes, lips and to press his defeated head into her abdomen.
The sound of barking dogs and hunting horns recalls her to Claudius waiting on horseback in the courtyard
below and she bolts out from her embrace of her son and down the stairs where a great blue cape is swirled
over her shoulders. She dashes out into the courtyard where she nearly pulls Claudius out of his saddle with
an eager kiss before mounting and riding off with her blonde tresses billowing in the wind.

This sequence allows Close to give full reign to her winsome, vigorous Gertrude. The language of her power
is physical; she exudes a sensuous vitality which, strikingly, is confusing to both of the men in her life.
Hamlet, obviously, is both attracted and repelled by her physical expressiveness and Claudius, whom one
would imagine to be completely caught up in her dazzle, is almost always shot with a cup of wine either in
hand or at lip—a sign that he's anxious about their relationship even before Hamlet begins directly (and
indirectly) to work on exposing his guilt.

This scene also reveals the ways in which Zeffirelli uses the vertical and horizontal lines in his film to get at
issues of enclosure and release embedded in the text. Denmark … prison; nutshell … infinite space; golden
roof … congregation of vapors; paragon of animals … quintessence of dust; undiscovered country … no
return; and heaven … earth all speak to Hamlet's desire for release and his sense of containment. “What
should such fellows as I do crawling between earth and heaven,” he rhetorically asks Ophelia staking out the
boundaries and central question of the human condition. Olivier visualized this cluster of images by his
Hamlet's repeated flights up the stairs from Elsinore's bowels (Claudius's territory) to the high platform above
(the Ghost's). Olivier's Hamlet is always trapped on the vertical; his Elsinore is an expressionistic image for
the mind's labyrinth from which there is no escape.

Zeffirelli and Gibson present us with a Hamlet who wants to believe he has more options, more avenues of
awareness, and modes of attack. They too exploit the perpendicular by repeatedly positioning Gibson's
Hamlet above the action unfolding below. He's on a high catwalk above the courtyard seemingly overhearing
as well as overseeing Polonius chastising Ophelia for being a “green girl” in accepting Hamlet's tenders of
affection. He's perched atop the shelves in Polonius's library in the fishmonger scene and pushes the library
ladder away as Polonius attempts to climb up to reach him. He enters above Polonius and Claudius when they are plotting to “loose” Ophelia on him; and he hops up on the council table (wearing Polonius's skull cap) to play the fool with Claudius about Polonius's where-abouts after the closet scene. He peers down from the ramparts through a grill to observe Claudius's (and the entire Court's) reveling below as he awaits his rendezvous with the Ghost. In each of these instances Gibson's possession of the high vertical line is an expression of Hamlet's superiority to the carnal, duplicitous, and obtuse world below. Crucially his one movement down and under comes as he retreats to the crypt after the nunnery scene to deliver the “To be or not to be” soliloquy as if it were his attempt to share his anguish and impotence with the dead, particularly his father.

Besides giving Hamlet a command of the vertical, Zeffirelli and Gibson also hold out the possibility that he might appropriate the horizontal as well. Gibson's restless Hamlet prowls Elsinore's upper and lower reaches and, in a stunning jump cut (immediately after he finishes the “To be or not to be” soliloquy), from dark to light, from inside to out, the film finds him outside Elsinore sprawled out under a bold blue sky on a green hillside overlooking a fjord with his horse grazing in the rear of the frame—a portrait of the hero who has lost the name of action. The glimpses of the external world we get from Olivier are gray and cold, melancholy landscapes mirroring his film's brooding Dane. Zeffirelli's romantic Italian blood can't imagine a world where a vibrant sun isn't always shining and violent action always a possibility. Gibson's reverie is broken by the arrival on horseback of Rosencrantz (Michael Maloney) and Guildenstern (Sean Murray) and the three men gallop off to a solitary log cabin which signals the landscape of an American Western and reminds us of that fistful of dust which first introduced us to Gibson's Hamlet. Zeffirelli allows his Hamlet to move in a landscape beyond the confines of Claudius's poisoned court, but it finally offers neither solace nor escape, for its beauty seems only to echo the corruption of his mother's.

In a dazzling essay which fatally misreads Zeffirelli's Hamlet, Linda Charnes faults the film for failing to grasp the play's essential film-noir quality. But Zeffirelli's film style is as far removed from noir as slapstick is from screwball. Zeffirelli's sensibility is romantic and grandly operatic; his artistic blood beats in technicolor, not black and white; his sensibility is passionate and sentimental, not cool and cynical. His solution to the Oedipal conflict, complicated in his own case by his bastardy and homosexuality, is not to destroy the father but to glorify the mother. This is the source of his lavish visual imagination and his attraction to the diva from Callas to Sutherland to Graves. That artistic attraction to the tragic female, the center of the operatic form, spills over into his Shakespeare films. Reading his autobiography (and the films themselves) reveals his greater preoccupation with Elizabeth Taylor and Olivia Hussey than with Richard Burton and Leonard Whiting. The same pattern is at work in his Hamlet where the landscape and atmosphere of the film seem more a reflection of Gertrude's zeitgeist than Hamlet's.

This is reinforced by Zeffirelli's handling of the end of Hamlet's first encounter with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Hamlet's Western interlude, and its possibilities for flight and independence, is foreclosed by the arrival of the players who literally transport him back into Elsinore and his reengagement with the family drama. Now, in the film's only reversal of this perspective, it is Gertrude who peers down from a high window on her son in the courtyard below making merry with the actors. Hamlet acknowledges her presence with a glance before slipping into the shadows to formulate his plan for “The Mousetrap.”

The actors have brought him back into the world of the female, which Zeffirelli underlines by transposing key lines between Hamlet and Ophelia from the nunnery scene as a frame for the play-within. In fact, by doing so “The Mousetrap” becomes less about Hamlet's power struggle with Claudius than about the conclusion of his relationship with Ophelia and the preparation for his confrontation with Gertrude which follows. Zeffirelli shoots Hamlet's exchange with Ophelia about “country matters” in a tight two-shot; Hamlet's tone is more intimate than bitter or bad-boy bawdy and Bonham Carter's Ophelia registers her puzzled understanding of his double-entendres with a raised eyebrow rather than a blush. Gibson's voice becomes more bold and
bitter as he spits out, “Look you how cheerfully my mother looks, and my father died within two hours.” Then, in an intriguing textual transposition, he replies to Ophelia’s “Nay ‘tis twice two months, my lord,” with “So long? Then get thee to a nunnery. Why wouldst thou be a breeder of sinners?,” followed by a cut to the actors juggling with torches as a prologue to evening’s main event. Everyone's playing with fire here. Then the film cuts back to an anguished Hamlet almost pleading with Ophelia: “What should such fellows as I do crawling between earth and heaven?” After the film's brief (and largely mimed) version of “The Mousetrap” has caused Bates's Claudius to rise and stagger toward the platform with his hand pressed to his right ear before uttering a guttural laugh and exiting, the film returns to Hamlet and Ophelia for “Believe none of us. We are arrant knaves all.” Long passionate kiss. “Farewell.”

At this moment in Shakespeare's text, where Hamlet is most ecstatically fixated on Claudius and the way in which he has signaled his guilt, Zeffirelli's film insists on displacing Claudius in Hamlet's imagination with Ophelia and by extension and cross-cutting, Gertrude. Certainly it is a bold idea to interweave the nunnery scene with “The Mousetrap” and there is a curiously apt logic to Zeffirelli's move to create a necessary link in Hamlet's mind between the confirmation of Claudius's guilt and his rejection of Ophelia (a replay of his visit to her room after his encounter with the Ghost) but it is also simply further evidence of the way in which Zeffirelli's film repeatedly stresses that Hamlet's key relationships are with his mother and lover rather than with his uncle and father.

This pattern is again made evident in the film's dismissal of all but two lines of Claudius's attempt at confession and prayer, so that Hamlet can more quickly speed to the central confrontation with Gertrude which follows. This is the duet to which the entire film has been building. Zeffirelli bathes Gertrude's bedroom in a golden glow which emanates as much from Close's face and hair (down and fully displayed for the first time in the film) as from the fire which blazes in her huge stone fireplace.

Gibson and Close give us the most intense and passionate encounter between Hamlet and Gertrude in the world of Hamlet on Film. Anthony Dawson is right to quip that here “lethal weapon meets fatal attraction in what turns out to be a dangerous liaison.” Violence, lethal and sexual, infuses and comes to climax in the scene. Gibson's Hamlet threatens Gertrude with his sword, rams it home into Polonius through the wild animal embroidered on the arras, and later straddles his mother and thrusts away at her in a terrifying mock rape to the rhythm of the text's ugliest image: “Nay but to live / In the rank sweat of an enseamed bed / Stewed in corruption, honeying and making love / Over the nasty sty.”

As Hamlet hammers away at Gertrude physically and Claudius verbally Close finally pulls Gibson into a desperate, passionate kiss meant not only to silence his aggression but to express her own repressed longings. This moment is as primal as the murder of Polonius and, for Zeffirelli, signals the ultimate release of Hamlet's wild discontent and opens the possibility for reconciliation with his mother. Scofield's sad, sweet Ghost (shot framed in a Romanesque archway to resemble a weary, worried saint in an altar piece) seems oblivious to the action he has interrupted. The film's kiss is the climax here, not the text's conjuration of the ghostly authorial father. The murder of Polonius and the rape of Gertrude have made Hamlet an arrant knave and allowed him a perspective from which, finally, to understand and share his mother's flawed humanity. By finally enacting the ugly image which has both disgusted and transfixed him, Gibson's Hamlet has freed its powerful hold on his imagination. When Hamlet leaves he gives Gertrude his chain with the locket of Old Hamlet on it and she signals her acceptance of their compact by tucking the locket away when Claudius enters her room.

For Zeffirelli this scene is as much about Gertrude as it is about Hamlet. Close's Gertrude is impetuous (she gives Gibson a vicious slap for his impudence) and passionate; she's a player here and not a poor one. This scene confirms that for Zeffirelli she not only “earns a place in the story,” but commands a central one. Again Adelman is extremely helpful in outlining the psychoanalytic pattern of interaction between mother and son here which the film realizes visually. By reminding us that Hamlet's first and last words in the scene are “Mother,” Adelman follows the progress by which Hamlet appears to rid himself of his ugly fantasies about
the sexualized maternal body. For Adelman “Hamlet cannot stop imagining, even commanding, the sexual act that he wants to undo.” Zeffirelli's film allows us to see that Gibson's Hamlet can rid his imagination of this contaminated vision only by reenacting it, allowing the expression of his own incestuous desires to finally obliterate Gertrude's, so that they can both be tarnished and thus capable of redeeming one another.

Gibson's Hamlet becomes, after the closet scene, the performance embodiment of Adelman's reading of his reconciliation with Gertrude: “Trust her he can begin to trust in himself and in his own capacity for action; and he can begin to rebuild the masculine identity spoiled by her contamination.”

This scene is obviously cathartic for Gibson's Hamlet who suddenly is released into the action hero mold his performance, up to this moment, has strained against. While the text indulges the offensive vigor of Hamlet's wit in his exchange with Claudius concerning Polonius's whereabouts, Gibson's Hamlet is also physically energetic in this scene as he prances on Claudius's council table wearing Polonius's skull cap in an action which matches the topsy-turvy motion of his wit, which turns the world, and its power and gender hierarchies, upside down as he traces the progress of a king through the guts of a beggar and bids Claudius farewell by calling him “dear Mother.” Gibson's Hamlet is never held captive in these exchanges and he leads Rosencrantz and Guildenstern away on “Come, for England!”

Gibson's Hamlet is also several steps ahead of Shakespeare's as Zeffirelli’s visualization of the shipboard exchange of ambassadorial instructions reveals that Hamlet has already prepared his revised version of the king's dispatch before he is fully aware of the contents of Claudius's. Zeffirelli returns Hamlet to Denmark on horseback as befits the action hero and the climactic duel is once again less about Hamlet and Laertes and Claudius than about Hamlet and Gertrude. She's the golden seraphic mother dressed in virgin blue with her hair now in two long braids. He's the vigorous, clownish son mocking the machismo of the duel for his mother's delight. It is as if the two of them existed once again in a pre-Claudian state of innocence. There's no suspicious anxiety on either of their faces in the repeated cross-cuts Zeffirelli makes between Hamlet's performance and Gertrude's spirited appreciation of her son's antics. Hamlet even signals one of his physical jokes with a wink, directed not at us, but at his mother. There's no physical or even eye contact between Claudius and Gertrude in this scene until she moves down from the dais to drink from the poisoned cup.

Bates's and Close's reading of their exchange is wonderfully nuanced, capturing both his realization that he's the last person in this world to caution another about taking a drink, and her smiling girlishness in ignoring his warning. From this moment the pace of Zeffirelli's cross-cutting between Gertrude and the duel intensifies and she collapses at the moment Hamlet receives the fatal hit. Hamlet's eventual attack on Claudius is anticlimactic and is delivered with none of the energy and panache devoted to the strike by Olivier, or subsequently, by Branagh. Claudius has never been the center of Zeffirelli's attention, Gertrude is at the core of his understanding of the play. And the film reminds us powerfully of the fates of the men who become infatuated with her golden girl glow from husbands and advisors to sons and lovers. The diva dies in an ugly parody of orgasm, having helped her quartet of male admirers to dusty death.

Zeffirelli's casting of the principal roles, his reshaping of the text, his use of cinematic space and landscape, the rhythm of his editing all have established the family romance at the heart of his interest in the play. By doing so his film gives visual substance and significance to Gertrude's central place in that romance, a place which—as Adelman notes—is much more opaque (but no less tantalizing) in Shakespeare's text. For Adelman, Gertrude remains “more a screen for Hamlet's fantasies about her than a fully developed character in her own right: whatever individuality she might have had is sacrificed to her status as a mother.” Zeffirelli and Close attempt to use the fantasies of another screen to shape a modern film version of Gertrude which has remarkable resonance with Adelman's powerful feminist and psychoanalytic reading of the play. For Zeffirelli, Close's Gertrude becomes the tragic diva—the golden girl of the West.

This article is an abridged version of a chapter from Samuel Crowl's book, The Branagh Renaissance: Reimagining Shakespeare in the Age of Film, forthcoming from Ohio University Press.
Notes


12. Ibid., p. 151.


14. “Dismember Me,” pp. 7-11. Charnes wants Zeffirelli's film to be father-centered when, as I am arguing, it is relentlessly about mothers.

15. Hapgood quotes Zeffirelli as saying about Hamlet: “The problem of the boy is quite simply—whom to love? He did not really love his father; that was a secondary character in his life. Ophelia? No, there is no love-story possible there, he is always uncertain, ambiguous—because his heart is not come out of his mother's womb! Because there is no safer place in all the world.” “Popularizing Shakespeare,” p. 90.

16. Michael Skovmand argues “Leaving the nunnery injunction (‘Get thee to a nunnery …’) out of the nunnery scene and shifting it to the play within the play, gives it a more logical context, placing this rather definitive statement in what is effectively the last scene with Ophelia and Hamlet together, their only later ‘encounter’ being at Ophelia's funeral.” “Mel's Melodramatic Melancholy: Zeffirelli’s *Hamlet,*” in *Screen Shakespeare* (Aarhus, Denmark: Aarhus University Press, 1994), p. 118.


19. *Suffocating Mothers*, p. 32.
20. Ibid, p. 34.
21. Ibid., p. 34.
Criticism: Production Reviews: Bernice W. Kliman (review date spring-summer 2001)


[In the following review, Kliman compares two stage productions of Hamlet, one directed by John Caird and the other by Peter Brook. Kliman praises both productions, particularly the performances of Simon Russell Beale as Hamlet in Caird's play and Adrian Lester's Hamlet in Brook's production.]

In his 1996 film, Kenneth Branagh cast Simon Russell Beale, who already had a distinguished career on stage, as the Second Gravedigger. Branagh darkened the shots with Beale almost to impenetrability and positioned him with back to camera or off-frame. But you can't keep a good man down. In the recent Royal National Theatre touring production, Beale embodied Hamlet, almost miraculously, as a good man in the deepest and richest sense of that bland word “good.”

The concurrent Hamlet by Adrian Lester provides an opportunity to compare two formidable performers and directors. In the Cheek by Jowl production of As You Like It, Lester played a superb Rosalind with wit, intelligence and depth. His character in the Mike Nichols film Primary Colors is as serious and thoughtful as his Hamlet is manic. He has the variety, the vocal and physical range, of all great actors. His portrayal of Hamlet, like Beale's, is a gift to those who love the play. Lester creates a volatile Hamlet who, while without the thoughtful rationality of Beale's, is always fun to watch and never obnoxious.

The productions in which Beale and Lester appear explain in part their differences—though inherent personality has an effect also. John Caird, the director for the NT production, allowed his actors flexibility and opportunities to grow into their characterizations. (Jonathan Croall describes Caird's methods in Hamlet Observed: The National Theatre at Work [London: NT Publications, 2001]). Peter Brook in his Théâtres des Bouffes du Nord production constrained Lester's Hamlet with a severely chopped text and a mechanistic production: both directors put their imprint on their productions but Brook is more heavy-handed, more insistent on having things his own way (as Adrian Lester reveals in a joint interview with Beale conducted by Matt Wolf, The New York Times 8 April 2001, Sect. 2). It would be interesting to see how Beale would work himself out of a straitjacket and how Lester might flourish in a free collaboration.

Both productions might have benefited from the example of the Shenandoah Shakespeare Express (Virginia): in a Hamlet with Thadd McQuade, directed by Ralph Alan Cohen in 1995, the text was barely cut and yet played in about 150 minutes without an intermission. Its pacing was crisp. To achieve the same 150 minutes Brook had to, as he puts it, “prune away the inessential,” the latter defined according to his own inspiration. (I wish directors would prune texts without saying that they are bettering Shakespeare by cutting to the core; instead of leaning on the authority of Shakespeare's “essence” they should just cut.) Caird and the cast shared the work of cutting; after excising much of 1.1, all of Fortinbras, and many lines throughout, the play still runs 210 minutes or more including the intermission.

Both productions abound in long and short pauses in mid-sentence. Without them more time would be available for language. In the disclosure scene (1.2), Caird's Horatio (Simon Day), after “I saw him” stops himself from, it seems, blurring out the revelation of the ghost's visitation, then after a long beat finishes instead with “once” (375: line numbers and quotations, somewhat modernized, from The Enfolded “Hamlet,” SNL extra issue, April 1996). This little touch builds his character; Horatio is careful and Marcellus has to urge him to tell Hamlet what he has seen. Every pause can be similarly justified perhaps. But effectiveness diminishes when virtually every speech is shot through with stops, and the price in lost language is high. It is not that the fuller text is precious in itself but that it is needed for clarity. Many critics and actors have noticed
that the play *seems* faster and clearer with a more complete text.

The two productions reaffirm what we know—that Hamlet is manifold. The actors could not have been more different: on the one hand, there is Simon Russell Beale, solid and quiet, moving quickly when occasion demanded (getting out of the way of the funeral procession, fencing adroitly) but also capable of focused and generative stillness. One of the finest actors I have seen on stage, he has great range and depth. He is an actor who can let you know what he is thinking, and his thoughts are worth attending to. For once I understood Hamlet: this Hamlet has no desire to be a king, no urge to be a hero. He wants to do the right thing. He is deeply grieved by his father's death and mother's swift remarriage but is incapable of hatred. One admires him because he has a pleasing wit and a serious intellect. One likes him because he is warm-hearted, lovable and sensitive; he is a better person than most people we know. This is not a popular take on Hamlet these days (and it is not Brook's view). Hamlet should be nasty and brutish (but not short), wicked and closer to Iago than to the Romantic Hamlet described by literary critics in the nineteenth century. Beale knows how to do Iago, having played a definitive one a few years ago, but his Hamlet is a sweet, humane person, without being a goody-goody. He can become irritated, as he does with Laertes at Ophelia's grave. One might multiply adjectives to describe Beale; he is multifaceted and every facet gleams. Many of us have wondered how stocky, forty-ish Burbage could have played Hamlet. Very well, I would say, if he was as superb as stocky, forty-ish Beale.

On the other hand, Adrian Lester, who is thirty-two and looks younger, is sinewy and flexible, constantly contorting himself into gymnastic poses. As Brook's Hamlet he may have been directed to portray an unlikable Hamlet, but he does not succeed in that. Physical moves, like hitting his head at "nay not so much, not two" earned laughs from the audience (322). Beale's gestures are smaller; he uses the space between his outstretched fingers to mime the "little month" since his father died (331). He suggests his pose of madness by pulling strands of hair to stand up rather than anything more obviously manic. The hair makes for a little throughline: there is a charming moment when near the end of the closet scene he shrugs off his mother (Sara Kestelman) as she tries to smooth his hair and then smooths it himself; it is a teenager's gesture.

Vocal as well as physical variety gave Lester his manic energy: from grunts, to shouts, growls and snarls. Beale has a fairly frequent extra-textual "Ha!" to express delight or dismay or irony. Though Beale's vocal range is wide, the production makes him work within the bounds of rationality, loving kindness, bewilderment at the actions of his father (asking him to do what it is impossible for this Hamlet to do) and at the behavior of his beloved mother, and deep sadness about Ophelia.

Beale's Hamlet is the contemplative man who absorbs and wonders; Lester's the agitated man whose physical tics relieve his anxieties. For Beale, since contemplation is Hamlet's nature, the playing of the role and the production's explanation for Hamlet's action and inaction are one. Nervous action does not clarify Lester's Hamlet's nature but is an "outward flourish"—and thus his physicality does not explain why he behaves as he does. The absence of text exacerbates the problem of interpretation: did Lester's Hamlet want to revenge his father by murdering the king? Was he conflicted about this duty or did he think it his duty to resist the ghost? Was he ambivalent about his father, uncle, mother, Ophelia? Not enough text was there to make or even intimate the point, not enough even to flesh out the remaining lines into fertile ambiguities. There is nothing wrong with not being able to “pluck out the heart of [Hamlet's] mystery,” but Brook has cut out too much that is essential—not any *particular* omission but simply “time to act.” In spite of Brook's rigid stylization, I think Lester could have graced an outstanding *Hamlet* if more of the text had been available to him; even in this production he is a wonder moment by moment.

Their gravedigger scenes represent the differences between the actors and the productions. Both scenes please; each Hamlet connects significantly with the gravedigger. In both, the same actors play the Polonius and gravedigger roles. Brook's Bruce Myers has a dancing way about him in both his roles; Caird's Peter Blythe (originally Denis Quilley) distinguishes his dignified Polonius from his bluecollar sexton. Lester is
gently irreverent with Yorick's skull, playing with it, puppet-like on a stick, as the gravedigger watches delighted. Similarly, Lester had played with the dead body of Polonius as if he were a puppet. Beale could not have done that. In his mother's closet, Hamlet believes he has killed the king; he is visibly shaken by the sight of Polonius, who falls excruciatingly slowly, and is still alive to hear Hamlet's sad words, "Thou find'st to be too busy is some danger" (2415).

In the graveyard scene, Beale thrills to see the skull of someone he knew and loved: it brings home to him the meaning of death as the ghost's visitations and his killing of Polonius have not. From Hamlet's intimate knowledge of Yorick, the gravedigger realizes who he is and with a gesture questions Horatio, who nods a response: instantly the gravedigger whips off his knit cap and holds it to his chest. Mitigating his sadness after his warm evocation of Yorick, Hamlet tops the skull with the gravedigger's cap and smiles wryly. Beale's Hamlet does not impose his melancholy on others. In Caird's version, the scene is a significant marker on the curve of the performance; in the Brook it seems a separable delight.

Caird is more inventive than Brook with the text; his readings are sometimes brilliant. This king (Peter McEnery) wants Hamlet to remain at the court not to spy on him but to become his son, to complete the takeover of his brother's life: thus, he warmly kisses Hamlet on the forehead, hands on his shoulders, just as later the ghost will also put hands on Hamlet. There are no innate villains in this Denmark. Hamlet's disrespect for his father's spirit in the "Old Mole" sequence has been variously explained away; Caird and Beale suggest it derives from anger at the ghost's (Sylvester Morand's) ranting revelations. The ghost's demand is likely to result in Hamlet's death—as Beale's Hamlet realizes even if the ghost does not.

On a smaller scale, many have tried to tease out a meaning for Polonius's "And let him ply his music" to Reynaldo. Here it is a way for Polonius to change the subject from something salacious to something harmless for Ophelia (Cathryn Bradshaw) to overhear when she bursts in. Reynaldo (Edward Gower) is deliciously silly, a worthy servant to a sometimes verbose and dense but never vicious Polonius.

The production makes more of Ophelia than most do. In the first court scene, her connectedness to Hamlet is lovely as she mourns with him, standing comfortably behind him. Told by Polonius about Hamlet's love, Caird's king (Peter McEnery) turns to Ophelia to ask "Do you think 'tis this?" (1181), giving her presence and dignity. In the nunnery scene, this Ophelia signals with a gesture that her father, whom she says is at home (1786), is actually present unseen. Hamlet's anger is directed at her father more than to her though he faults her also for playing a part in this entrapment. After the nunnery scene, realizing that their relationship is over, she reads, then tears the letters she had tried to return to him, then tenderly places them in her reticule; she will later withdraw these fragments and deliver them as flowers. The relationship between Hamlet and Ophelia is deep and poignant.

Beale's Hamlet would not insult Polonius crudely; when Polonius reacts to "These tedious old fools" (1262), Hamlet, feigning innocence, indicates that it is his book, not he who says that.

Though Horatio is his special friend whom Hamlet detains to listen to words usually kept as soliloquies in other productions (at the end of 1.2, 1.5 and 3.2, for example), Hamlet is sweetly genial to all. He is delighted to see Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. It is only when Guildenstern starts pressing him about ambition that he becomes bewildered and begins to understand them. His disappointment, however, does not deteriorate into bitterness.

Textual illuminations like these often radiate throughout the play. The queen has been moved by the play-within to rummage in her chests for the painting of her first husband whom she had forgotten till reminded by the player queen's declarations of fidelity. Gertrude kisses his image over and over; later Hamlet points to that picture and the picture in her locket to compare the two husbands (a fresh solution to the two-picture problem, and a relief from the ubiquitous double lockets of so many productions)—but he can be
more gentle than most Hamlets because she has already recognized her faithlessness. Thus Hamlet's "Mousetrap" successfully achieves one great purpose, awakening his mother's conscience. She separates herself from the king, refusing to exit with him at the end of 4.1 and 4.7.

Later she will drop her dried wedding bouquet and her veil, which she had also rediscovered in her trunk, into Ophelia's grave, linking herself decisively with the younger woman, both of whom had loved men named Hamlet.

Through thoughtful excisions Caird cuts knotty cruxes. With Hamlet's lines to the First Player about some "dozen or sixteen lines" (1581-82) cut, Hamlet's idea about using the play comes freshly at the climax of the soliloquy that ends act two (1644-45). Moreover, when Hamlet offers his advice to the players, he is concerned about the correct interpretation of the whole play (which an audience can believe to be his) rather than a dilettante worried about his little addition. With a thrilling transposition, Caird further heightens the effect of the play-within: Shakespeare's Hamlet destroys the effect of his "Mousetrap" by leaping into the action before the play's poisoner has a chance to entrap the king. In Caird's version, the king rises, mesmerized by Lucianus, and virtually acts out the poisoning, mirroring Lucianus's gestures. Hamlet rocks with nervous energy, watching. When the king pauses, Hamlet jumps forward, prompting him to continue with gestures and words: "He poisons him i'th garden for his estate?" as if to say, "Go on, go on." But the king instead rushes out. One can see why the court might not have caught on to the revelation of murder and at the same time how Hamlet could be convinced.

At first I could not see why Caird placed the intermission in the middle of 3.2 after eliciting from Horatio his ambiguous corroboration of the king's guilt and before the entrance of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. At the end of this first act Hamlet, sitting upstage on the king's throne with Horatio next to him in the queen's place, calls for music (2167). The musicians sit with backs to the audience where the players had performed. (Gonzago and Baptista had faced the king and queen sitting upstage but also turned to each other to present profiles to the audience—a clever staging, which put Hamlet downstage, able to observe both the performance and the king.) Ophelia, who had remained standing where she had watched the play with Hamlet, slowly walks across the stage from downstage left to downstage right and off, as Hamlet sits sobbing. The curtain falls. When the curtain rises, there has been a filmic reverse shot: the thrones are now where the musicians had been and vice versa, a visualization of a turning point, or as Samuel Crowl says, a turn "deeper into the private psyches of the play's central characters" (10). Hamlet knows that all is over now: love, life itself. The "Mousetrap," of course, has put the king on notice that Hamlet is his enemy.

But what of the killing of the king? Discounting the moment in the prayer scene, this production gives Hamlet an opportunity when, after Polonius's death, Claudius confronts him (4.3). Hamlet holds his knife to the king's chest as the latter extends his arms wide, his palms facing outward (a frequent gesture in this production by the king and by Hamlet), calmly daring Hamlet to strike. When he does not, the king turns his right palm upward for the knife, which Hamlet relinquishes. Caird recreates this same picture in the last scene, but this time Hamlet drags the blade of the poisoned foil across the king's extended hand. This is an apt culmination for Beale's Hamlet. If indeed the foil is poisoned, then the king is dead, for the blow itself is certainly not mortal. Hamlet has achieved the ghost's command without betraying himself.

Those who missed his Hamlet can listen to Beale on the Arkangel recording (Penguin 1999); they will at least hear his excellent verse speaking—though they will miss Caird's keen direction. One may hope that Lester will get another chance to explore the role: perhaps he will star in the next filmed Hamlet, a consummation devoutly to be wished. Maybe Caird would be the person to direct a richly meaningful film version.

Note
I saw Beale's performances on 17 April 2001 (in Boston's Wilbur Theatre) and again on 31 May (in the Brooklyn Academy of Music's Howard Gilman Opera House) and Lester's on April 27 at BAM's Harvey Theatre. My thanks to the Wilbur and BAM staffs for their gracious assistance and to Tom Pendleton for timely rescues. Many excellent reviews have appeared for these productions considered separately (see, e.g., Samuel Crowl, *Shakespeare Bulletin* 19, 1 (Winter 2001): 9-10 on Beale and 32-33 on Lester and Robert S. Macdonald on Beale in *The Shakespeare Newsletter* 50, 3 (Fall 2000): 86, 88.

**Criticism: Production Reviews: Marguerite Tassi (review date spring-summer 2001)**


[In the following review, Tassi comments on Peter Brook's stage production of Hamlet. Tassi observes the production's simplicity and starkness, praises Adrian Lester's performance of Hamlet, and notes that the production at times suffered from problems due to Brook's script alterations.]

On Sunday, April 15 at the Mercer Arena in Seattle, Washington, the evening performance was *The Tragedy of Hamlet*, British director Peter Brook's controversial adaptation of Shakespeare's play. In the program notes, Brook asserted, “It is only when we forget Shakespeare that we can begin to find him.” In this enigmatic statement we find Brook's justification for his alteration of the play's form and his search for vital, even primal, forces at work in character and language that have not been emphasized by other directors. This production was clearly not a resurrection of the Elizabethan theater, for Brook's concern was not to aim for an authentic reproduction of the early modern play (as much as that is possible), nor was it to stay faithful to the First Folio's or second quarto's forms. In *The Tragedy of Hamlet*, Brook's third professional attempt at the play, he stripped away everything he found inessential to the theatrical vitality of *Hamlet*, so that our awareness was keenly focused on how Shakespeare's play explores the mythic and philosophical problems of being. Brook's directorial vision marked many aspects of this production: a multi-ethnic cast that spoke with various English accents, the faraway sounds of Eastern music, stylized movement, a pared-down playing space, and simple tunics for costumes. Such choices in casting and staging reinforced the universal dimension of the play; in essence, Brook's production tapped deeply into the universal, mythic spirit of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*.

It is undeniable that Brook has much to offer the “Hamlet dialogue,” both in theatrical and literary critical terms. Brook's particular genius lies in experimentation, risk-taking, and essentializing the theater experience. His adaptation reflects a rigorous cutting and re-arranging of the text, which not only compressed and somewhat reconfigured the form, but also restored a sense of discovery to the all-too-familiar script. In dispensing with almost half of the text and some of its characters (e.g., Fortinbras, Reynaldo), he provoked his audience to “find” the play again in a new, ascetic form. The overall effect was that of novelty, intensity, and speed: the action moved along without pause, and Hamlet had no time to hesitate; indeed it was made painfully clear in this production that there is never a just and right moment for Hamlet's revenge, until the very moment he takes it.

Brook sharpened our awareness of words (and what the actors were doing with them) by removing all distractions. The set, designed by Chloé Obolensky, was spare, though vivid in color scheme; a persimmon orange carpet marked the playing space, pillows and rugs were thrown in a few areas, and a Japanese musician, Toshi Tsuchitori, present throughout the drama, accompanied much of the action and speech with haunting strains of music. Visual images were created by only a few props, most notably Yorick's skull from the gravedigger scene. Brook dispensed with every material thing that was not crucial to the making of Hamlet's world. The impression one had was that Brook stripped Shakespeare's play down to its metaphysical
The stark beauty of the drama—it's sheer simplicity, we might say—was to be found in its language, most particularly in the dazzling verbal athleticism of Adrian Lester, a compellingly modern, brilliant Hamlet. Lester has a razor-sharp command of Shakespearean diction and syntax, and even more, a feel for the idiosyncratic musicality of Hamlet's speech. Lester's asexual presence and virtuosity with language gave Hamlet a startlingly fresh, intellectual presence. With the cutting of the script, Lester remained on stage for most of the evening, electrifying the audience with his humor, physical agility, and anguished speeches. He made clear his repulsion for playing, for lies, pretense and the like, taking on his “antic disposition” with an air of mischievous calculation and exasperation. He was very aware of the audience's presence in the arena—that we were his intimates, listening, admiring, and watching his every move. Indeed he seemed to cultivate an intimacy with us, stealing sly glances at us or appealing directly to us to enjoy his taunting of Polonius. When Lester delivered the soliloquy, “O what a rogue and peasant slave am I,” he did a bit of outrageous ham acting with some of the lines, stopped in disgust, and then returned to seriousness (non-acting) as he expressed his intent to use the theater experimentally to catch Claudius's conscience. This was typical of Lester's performance: his Hamlet is a purist with a dazzling, though sometimes dangerous, wit, who feels trapped within a world of pretense and foolishness.

Lester's “To be or not to be” was delivered with great simplicity. The speech had been moved to a point after Polonius's death, which, in performance, had the effect of making Hamlet appear to be in a state of emotional and moral exhaustion. Lester's gestures as he spoke the soliloquy were those of taking his pulse, and then cutting his wrist, a most simple and moving way to express being and not being. It was an affecting stage picture, quiet, despairing, and honest. This worked in high relief with the gravedigger scene in which Lester comically, even outrageously, manipulated Yorick's skull, which he placed on a stick and worked like a jester's head. Both scenes offered moments of renewed vision in which Lester's embodiment of Hamlet was completely fresh and convincing.

Another moment of heightened and renewed vision occurred when the Player King delivered his Hecuba speech. He chanted the speech in the strange language, Orghast, invented by Ted Hughes, and ancient Greek; those on the stage looked on, wonder-struck by the performance. We, too, in the audience were spellbound, charmed as much by the chant, as by the effect it was having on the characters: the defamiliarizing of the text worked to restore a sense of awe at this moment. Here was a tribute to the theater's power.

Some notable problems, due primarily to the script alterations, did not escape attention. Laertes made a surprise appearance late in the play (theatergoers could only have assumed that he too had been cut after the first act passed with no sign of him). At this late point in the drama, since we had not witnessed him in his roles as son and brother, we had no emotional connection to him, and his grief over the deaths of Polonius and Ophelia did not carry the emotional charge that it should. The absence of Fortinbras and the larger political context of the play was a loss undeniably felt by those who know the tragedy intimately. While this cut allowed Brook to stay focused on Hamlet's personal dilemma, it robbed Denmark of political realities and consequences. Gertrude, played by Natasha Parry, appeared as a gracious lady, but seemed to be too naively oblivious to the import of everything that was taking place around her. Finally, some of the doublings were confusing—the actors who played Rosencrantz and Guildenstern took other roles, but did not differentiate between them sufficiently either through costume or acting style. The doublings of Claudius and Old Hamlet, played expertly by Jeffrey Kissoon, and Polonius and the Gravedigger, played by the brilliant and versatile Bruce Myers, however, both struck one as uncannily right. In the former, we had a show in contrasts; in the former, an underlying connection was implied between two kinds of fools.

Criticism aside, Brook's Hamlet is a production not to be forgotten, for the director's approach, with the many highly skilled, energetic actors, made the theater come as close to life as it can, offering a renewed vision of one of Shakespeare's most frequently produced dramas. The play ended with the same haunting question that
plunged us into the play-world, reminding us once again of essential matters. It is our question, it is Hamlet's question, it is the actors' question to us: “Who's there?” Horatio, played as a wide-eyed, devoted friend to Hamlet by Scott Handy, asked the question both times. Not only did this question inspire a strange sense of metaphysical unease, but in the play's final moment, we also witnessed the rising of the dead: all of the actors slowly stood up to join Horatio as he peered hopefully into the darkened theater, as if looking into some vast unknowable realm. The playing space visibly lightened. Here was a moment of pure metaphysical being in the theater. This was indeed a different vision of Shakespeare's play that had the power to disturb, to defy expectations, and to remind us that Hamlet still has tremendous vitality and philosophical importance in today's theater.

**Criticism: Themes: Charles R. Forker (essay date summer 1963)**


[In the following essay, Forker analyzes the implications of the way the theater functions as a symbol in Hamlet, contending that the theater serves as a symbol for the exposure of unseen realities and the revelation of secrets.]

I

A rapid glance at any concordance will reveal that Shakespeare, both for words and metaphors, drew abundantly from the language of the theater. Terms like argument, prologue, stage, pageant, scene, player, act, actor, show, audience, rant—these and their cousins which evoke dramatic connotations occur again and again throughout his plays in instances which range from very literal or technical significations to highly figurative and symbolic ones. This constant recourse to dramatic vocabulary suggests an analogy in Shakespeare's mind between life and the theater—an analogy which he himself makes explicit and which even the name of his own theater, the Globe, reinforces. Examples are not far to seek. Everyone will recall the famous references of Jaques ("All the world's a stage …") and Macbeth ("Life's but … a poor player, / That struts and frets his hour upon the stage …"); and there are many others. Not infrequently the figure is associated with pain or death and the relation of man to the cosmos; hence, it becomes a natural focus for the idea of tragedy. The Duke in *As You Like It* speaks of the world as a “universal theatre” which “Presents more woeful pageants than the scene / Wherein we play …”; Lear with the penetration of madness bewails that “we are come / To this great stage of fools”; and Richard of Bordeaux, the actor-king, glances back over his life to find it as unreal and as temporary as a play—“a little scene, / To monarchize, be fear'd, and kill with looks”.

That Shakespeare should have conceived of man as an actor, the world as a stage, and the universe as its backdrop is not extraordinary, for, apart from the fact that he himself played the triple role of actor, playwright, and part-owner of a theater, the metaphor was a Renaissance commonplace. The motto of the Globe, “*Totus mundus agit histrionem*”, is only the most succinct expression of an idea extended to greater length in Montaigne, in Erasmus' *Praise of Folly*, in Romei's *Courtier's Academie*, and in the works of Shakespeare's fellow dramatists, as, for instance, the Induction to Marston's *Antonio and Mellida*.²

The intention of this essay is to analyze some of the elaborate ramifications of the theater symbol as it functions throughout *Hamlet*, to suggest that by reexamining the play with emphasis on the theme of acting, we may reach certain new perceptions about its dramatic architecture and see some of its central issues (Hamlet's delay, for instance, his disillusionment and madness, his intrigue with Claudius, his relation to his mother, his knowledge of himself) in fresh perspective. Before, however, we consider the one play of Shakespeare that embodies his most personal statements on the drama, let us make some further
generalizations about the complexity of aesthetic response which theatrical imagery entails and the relation of this complexity to the idea and nature of tragedy.

S. L. Bethell\(^3\) points out that references to the theater in a public performance elicit a double or “multi-conscious” reaction from the audience. Suppose Humphrey Bogart (at the local cinema) corners his gangster with a loaded revolver and sneers that the bullets are real, not blanks “like in the movies”. The chief effect of this remark is to establish verisimilitude. We are invited to compare what is happening on the screen with cruder versions of the same thing which we have seen before, and the implication is that we know a hawk from a handsaw. But at the same time the remark distances the performance by reminding us that we are after all looking at a film and not at real life. The response is the same in Shakespeare, but its duality is more constant there, not only because the theatrical references are more frequent and the actors are people instead of pictures, but because the Elizabethans, lacking our naturalistic visual aids, had to rely much more than we are accustomed to do upon the symbolic suggestiveness of the spoken word. So, when Fabian comments in *Twelfth Night*, apropos of gulling Malvolio: “If this were play’d upon a stage now, I could condemn it as an improbable fiction”, or when Cleopatra inveighs against her would-be captors with “… I shall see / Some squeaking Cleopatra boy my greatness / I’ th’ posture of a whore”, the audience responds to the situation on a dual plane of reality. They are aware of play-world and real world at once. The opposition between appearance and reality, between fiction and truth, is maintained; yet the appearance seems more real and the fiction more true.

In *Hamlet* this duality functions almost constantly, not only because there is so much reference to playing and to related aspects of the fictional world, both literally and figuratively, but because the center of the play itself is largely concerned with the arrival of the players at Elsinore and the “mouse-trap” that constitutes the climax or turning point of the plot.\(^4\) Since Hamlet as a dramatic character is manifestly interested in the aesthetics of drama and its analogy to his own emotional predicament (“What’s Hecuba to him, or he to Hecuba …?” [II.ii.585]), the conflicts generated are teasingly complex. The theatrical references urge us to a sympathetic union with the characters, their actions and their feelings, and at the same time give them the objective reality of artifice through aesthetic distance. The world of the play becomes at once both more and less real than the actual world, and we are required to be aware of this relationship inside as well as outside the play.

The idea of theater therefore embodies one of the mysterious paradoxes of tragedy, the impingement of appearance and reality upon each other. This is the very problem that obsesses Hamlet throughout the play and that eventually destroys both guilty and innocent alike. What is real seems false and what is false seems real. Spiritual growth, Shakespeare seems to say, is an extended lesson in separating out the components of the riddle and in learning to recognize and cope with one in the “role” or “disguise” of the other. Hence the theater to Hamlet, to Shakespeare, and to the audience becomes a symbol for making unseen realities seen, for exposing the secret places of the human heart and objectifying them in a way without which they would be unbearable to look upon. We see into ourselves, as it were, through a looking-glass. Thus the mirror image is connected in Hamlet’s mind with acting and, by extension, with other forms of art which penetrate hypocrisy and pretense:

… the purpose of playing … is, to hold, as ’twere, the mirror up to nature; to show virtue her own feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure.

(III. ii. 21-25)

Later in the closet scene Hamlet verbally acts out his mother's crimes before her and teaches her by means of “counterfeit presentment” the difference between Hyperion and a satyr: “You go not till I set you up a glass / Where you may see the inmost part of you” (III.iv.19-20). In Ophelia's description of Hamlet as “The glass of fashion and the mould of form, / Th' observ'd of all observers” (III.i.161-162), the mirror and actor images
coalesce as a symbol of truth reflected.

The very court of Denmark is like a stage upon which all the major characters except Horatio take parts, play roles, and practice to deceive. The irony is that Hamlet himself must adopt a pose in order to expose it in others. All the world's a stage. But for him pretense may entail revelation; Claudius “acts” only to conceal. Since, for Hamlet, the end of playing is to show virtue her own feature and scorn her own image, he not only sees through false appearances (“Seems, madam? Nay, it is. I know not ‘seems’” [I.ii.76]) but also feigns in order to objectify his inner feelings; he both uses and recognizes “honest artifice”. He welcomes the players enthusiastically and approves their art. One piece in their repertory, part of which he has memorized, he chiefly loves because there is “no matter in the phrase that might indict the author of affectation”. It shows “an honest method, as wholesome as sweet” (II.ii.461-463). His antic disposition, although a smoke screen to protect him from his enemies, is also a dramatic device which allows Hamlet to express to himself and to the audience the nagging pain and disgust which the world of seeming has thrust upon him. It is by acting himself that he penetrates the “acts” of Polonius, of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, of Gertrude, and even of the innocent Ophelia, upon whom her father has forced a role of duplicity.

The true appearances of things are revealed by phenomena from outside the world of Elsinore, by the Ghost who brings a vision of reality from the dead and by the players who bring another vision of truth from art. Thus the action of the play inhabits three kingdoms, and Claudius, a false king, is hedged on both sides by images of truth—on one side by old Hamlet, the “royal Dane”, and on the other by a player-king. It is one of the significant ironies of the play that the player's acting prompts Hamlet to action, that the action he chooses is a theatrical one, and that Claudius, himself perhaps the arch actor, is made to look upon his own deepest secret through the agency of drama. Thus, at one pole of the tragic magnet, the theater is the symbol of inner truth. Just as the player's speech is true for Hamlet and The Murder of Gonzago all too true for Claudius, so Hamlet, Prince of Denmark is truth for us. There is a sense in which the characters there are the abstract and brief chronicles of the time (“The players cannot keep counsel; they'll tell all” [III.ii.151]) and we are guilty creatures sitting at a play.

But if the stage equals truth at its highest level, it also equals falsity at its lowest. Throughout Shakespeare's other plays but especially in Hamlet “playing” is the stock metaphor for pretense and hypocrisy. The tragedy as a whole is a tissue of intrigue and counter-intrigue, a scaffold for “unnatural acts” and “purposes mistook”, all “put on by cunning and for'ced cause” (V.ii.392-395). The idea of falsity is therefore closely allied to the mention of actors, particularly bad ones, and indeed most references to them throughout Shakespeare are pejorative. Actors all too often out-Herod Herod, strut and fret upon the stage, or tear a passion to tatters. They are false, not because they imitate humanity, but because they imitate it so abominably. They pervert the dramatic function by concealing inner reality under a crude show of outward affectation.

When the analogy of acting (in this complex of associations) is applied to character, it of course implies moral weakness or corruption. It is this thrust of the metaphor which points to Claudius, Gertrude, Polonius, Laertes, and Osric as players on the world's stage, bad actors (with all the ambiguity the word contains) because they conceal the truth either from themselves or from their fellows or both. Ophelia and Reynaldo are players with a difference, for they do not act as free agents like the others, but have been cast in their roles by Fortune. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern occupy an ambiguous position between these extremes. Having no reason to suspect Claudius' secret crimes or, later on, his design upon Hamlet's life, they are obliged to carry out their sovereign's orders. Nevertheless, there is an unsavory side to their behavior which makes them more than simple dupes. They are natural meddlers, and, as Hamlet says, “they did make love to this employment” (V.ii.57). Hamlet himself is symbolically the most complex type of the actor and, therefore, a special case, for Shakespeare has gathered up into his character all the self-contradictions and subtle paradoxes which the symbol can express. Hamlet is caught in a maze of antinomies. He both chooses his “role” and has it forced upon him by fate. He must live in the divided worlds of good and evil, of fact and fiction, of actuality and feigning, of spectator and performer. His part requires of him both action and passivity, and he is constantly
stepping out from behind his mask to serve as chorus to his own tragedy.

The figure of the actor in *Hamlet* may therefore be viewed as a symbolic focus for the idea of tragic conflict—man divided against himself, forced in his brief hour upon the stage to play conflicting roles and torn between the compulsion to act (to do) and the need to pretend and hence not to do. Man as actor must reconcile reason with passion, the beast with the angel, the will with the imagination, and his dignity with his wretchedness. And as tragedy, for the audience, represents the ordering of its own inner divisions, so “acting” for Hamlet is his way of objectifying the various modes of his own self-awareness. The theater audience can preserve a comforting detachment, for its involvement is purely imaginative. The spectators know that *Hamlet* is only a play. But Hamlet, the character, is not so sure, for the action in which he takes part is real from one point of view and unreal from another. Claudius' relation to theatrical performance is something else again, for he is tented to the quick by it. At one point, he cannot maintain any detachment at all. The extent to which acting is real or illusory depends largely upon the position of the observer, and we, like Hamlet himself, are permitted to shift position in our imaginations and to look upon the fiction from both sides of that hypothetical curtain which divides the stage from the pit. Claudius does not have that privilege.

It will surely be apparent by this time that the various facets of the theater-life equivalence (particularly when it is dramatized upon a stage) constantly threaten to blur into one another. The blurring results, in part, from the critic's method of abstracting meanings which Shakespeare embodies organically, and it should remind us that tragedy is a mystery to be shared rather than a problem to be solved.

To sum up, the symbol of the actor is important and implies (particularly in *Hamlet*) a good many meanings: metaphorically, he may stand for both true and false seeming and for doer and pretender; at times he may serve as audience to his own performance and to those of the other actors on the stage or as chorus to both. He may function both as the observer and the observed, playing in more than one sphere of reference at once. Lastly, he can symbolize tragedy itself—man as ephemeral, man as Fortune's fool, man as self-aware, and man divided against self. If we keep these generalizations in mind, it should be possible to trace the dramatic structure of Shakespeare's most popular play in terms of its theatrical symbolism and to see its progress (metaphorically as well as literally) as a series of “scenes” and “acts” in which the characters “play” to each other, combining and alternating between the roles of spectator and performer.

II

The overriding symbol of Elsinore as a stage upon which the people do not always recognize each other in their shifting roles is immediately hinted in the nervous first lines (spoken upon a “platform”) of the opening scene:

BER.

Who's there?

FRAN.

Nay, answer me. Stand and unfold yourself.

Marcellus and Horatio enter presently, and it soon becomes apparent that they are there to watch an appearance of some kind. This is, of course, the Ghost, which Horatio successively refers to throughout the course of the scene as “fantasy”, “image”, and “illusion”. Already at the very outset, we are shown a scene within a scene. The Ghost is a kind of show, and the other characters on the stage are its audience. This relationship immediately raises the mysterious appearance-reality question in our minds, for we do not know as yet what to make of the apparition. Horatio, who serves throughout the play as a medial figure between
stage world and real world, a kind of raisonner whose reactions we watch as a guide to our own, fills in the political background for us, and the scene ends with the decision to acquaint Hamlet with the supernatural phenomenon just witnessed.

The next episode, played, we discover, in the king's audience chamber, gives us our first glimpse of the Danish court and its dominant figures. This, too, is a kind of performance, though it only emerges as such very gradually in the light of details which are added later. Claudius makes a formal speech from the throne, putting as fair a face as possible on his “o'er hasty marriage” and “our dear brother's death”. In its extensive use of doublets the speech communicates a hint of duplicity. After the ambassadors are received and Laertes has been granted his suit, our attention turns to Hamlet, the solitary and silent auditor who refuses to be drawn into Denmark's “act”, remaining on the periphery to comment bitterly on the difference between “seems” and “is”. When his mother remarks about the “nighted colour” of his mourning costume, he replies in a metaphor from the stage:

These indeed seem,
For they are actions that a man might play;
But I have that within which passeth show—
These but the trappings and the suits of woe.

(I. ii. 83-86)

Hamlet is not deceived by the “cheer and comfort” of the king's eye nor persuaded by the queen's plea that he “look like a friend on Denmark”. In the soliloquy that follows he acts as chorus, emphasizing to the audience the discrepancy he feels between fictional reality or absent truth and actual, present hypocrisy. He compares himself to Hercules, Gertrude to Niobe, the dead king to Hyperion, and Claudius to a satyr. His speech ends with the realization that he too must play a role, and we understand that “acting” represents inner conflict: “But break my heart, for I must hold my tongue” (I.ii.159). Now Horatio “delivers” the “marvel” of the apparition to Hamlet, which the prince receives excitedly in contrast to the words he has just heard from the king and queen. He will be a willing spectator to this appearance, and he enjoins Horatio to adopt his pose: “Give it an understanding but no tongue” (I.ii.250). Thus Hamlet is already involved in a double role: he will be both “actor” and “audience” at once.

The theme of acting is now echoed in the underplot. Laertes, about to depart for France, adopts the role of worldly-wise big brother and warns Ophelia not to take the appearance of Hamlet's love for truth. Her best safety lies in fear (a euphemism for pretense), for “The chariest maid is prodigal enough / If she unmask her beauty to the moon” (I.ii.36-37). Ophelia sees through his performance, however, and counters with her own distinction between the “ungracious” role of pastor and the “puff'd and reckless libertine” beneath it (I.ii.47-49). Polonius now enters to give his son some fatherly advice in the same tone Laertes had used to his sister. The roles are reversed and actor-father now performs to auditor-son. His counsel is a lesson in cautious appearance: “Give thy thoughts no tongue, / Nor any unproportion’d thought his act” (I.iii.59-60). His concluding words, “This above all—to thine own self be true” (I.iii.78), ironically point up to the audience the contrast between “seems” and “is”. After Laertes' departure, Polonius repeats his son's warning to Ophelia, and since Hamlet's vows are but “springes to catch woodcocks”, he orders her to play a part unnatural to her and to refrain from conversation with the prince. Acting for Ophelia, as for Hamlet, symbolizes inner division. She, too, must hold her tongue.

In terms of the theatrical symbolism, the situation on stage at the Ghost's second appearance is the same as before, with the difference that Hamlet is now the principal spectator at a performance to which Horatio (in an earlier scene) had spoken the prologue. To the verbal part of the Ghost's revelation, he is the sole auditor. Although Hamlet is not quite certain intellectually of the Ghost's “honesty”, the emotional effect both for him and for us is that of truth disclosed: “Pity me not, but lend thy serious hearing / To what I shall unfold”
And now the prince learns the extent to which Claudius had been feigning in the court scene—that “the whole ear of Denmark” has been “Rankly abus’d” (I.v.36-38). The Ghost also refers to Gertrude's hypocrisy, calling her “my most seeming-virtuous queen” (I.v.46). After the apocalyptic disclosure, Hamlet's answer to his father's words, “Remember me”, is:

Ay, thou poor ghost, while memory holds a seat
In this distracted globe.

(I. v. 96-97)

Thus Shakespeare, in a triple pun (one meaning of which is unfortunately lost in modern performance) gathers up several aspects of reality into a single phrase and allows the audience to respond multi-consciously. The “distracted globe” (literally “mind” or “head”) represents Hamlet's inner world, his divided self, his microcosm, and by extension, it connects the real world, the macrocosm, with the theatrical world through the mention of the very theater in which the play was being performed. Hamlet's reaction to what the Ghost has told him underlines the crucial split between actor as true and false seeming. The Ghost himself plays the first role in this ambivalence and, by doing so, turns Hamlet's attention upon the false actor, the usurper who “may smile, and smile, and be a villain” (I.v.108). Hamlet is caught between the two illusions, that which reveals and that which conceals the truth. In order to reconcile the two symbolic worlds, for they are “out of joint”, he must act in the true world by “acting” in the false one. The “antic disposition”, then, is truly to be a double role. To Hamlet himself and to the real audience it will mean one thing; to the court audience at Denmark, it will signify quite another.

The opening of Act II takes us back to the underplot with Polonius sending Reynaldo to spy on Laertes in Paris. His directions to the servant are truly a lesson in “seeming”, and the speech may be regarded as a humorously ironic counterpart to Hamlet's later lesson to the players on how a “bait of falsehood” may take a “carp of truth” (II.i.63). Ophelia enters to recount to her father (now in the role of audience) the scene of Hamlet's distracted appearance to her in the guise of a madman. This instance of Hamlet's behavior is a scene (like the queen's description of Ophelia's death) which the audience sees at one remove from actuality through the speech of an actor as narrator. But it is clear from Ophelia's words that Hamlet has already assumed his dual role, for the sincerity of true feeling shows through the guise of affected madness. The tone of the speech also indicates that Ophelia is moved, though she does not understand what lies behind the “antic disposition”. The prying Polonius is fooled by his daughter's recital, and Hamlet's performance conceals from him what it reveals to us.

In the next scene we are introduced to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern attending upon the king and queen. The two carbon-copy courtiers are told of Hamlet's transformation, informed that neither the “exterior nor the inward man / Resembles that it was” (II.ii.6-7), and assigned the job of spying on him, even as Reynaldo had been charged with a similar task in the preceding scene. Claudius, the actor who hides behind a mask of smiling, enlists two other actors who will attempt to “play upon” Hamlet; and we know that he too is wearing a mask. A chain of “playings” is thus set in motion in which the disguises on both sides will either succeed or fail depending on how much the opposing side knows. The theater audience, of course, may enter into these “playings” more and more omnisciently as the plot unfolds.

After Voltimand and Cornelius report the news of Norway's alliance to Denmark and Polonius with more “art” than “matter” has mistakenly diagnosed the cause of Hamlet's madness to the royal pair, the theatrical parallel is again apparent in the decision to “find / Where truth is hid” (II.ii.158) through what amounts to another little play-within-the-play. In this production Polonius and the king will play audience “behind an arras” and Ophelia will act the ingenue in order to trap Hamlet into a confession of his true feelings.
Now Hamlet enters playing his role of madness, and the king and queen withdraw to let Polonius “board him”. “Actor” confronts “actor”, and Shakespeare, for the first time, fully exploits the tragicomic possibilities of Hamlet's dual role—Hamlet playing to himself and the audience and Hamlet playing to Polonius. Throughout this episode and the next (which substitutes Rosencrantz and Guildenstern for Polonius in the symbolic pattern) the ironic disjunction between pretense and sincerity is stressed again and again as Hamlet penetrates the disguise of his opponent:

**POL.**

**Honest, my lord?**

**HAM.**

Ay sir. To be honest, as this world goes, is to be one man pick'd out of ten thousand.

(II. ii. 177-179)9

And Hamlet to the stage twins: “… there is a kind of confession in your looks, which your modesties have not craft enough to colour” (II.ii.289-290).

A little later the players are announced to the prince. If man delights not him, they do, and it is at this point that Shakespeare begins to play explicitly upon the paradoxes of the theatrical process itself. Since the players' art for Hamlet symbolizes a kind of artifice which is at least potentially “good”, being at once more true and more unreal than the “acting” of the court, the company serves as both contrast and parallel to the people who surround him. The actors have come to Elsinore by reason “of the late innovation” (the current popularity of the “little eyases”), and Hamlet can identify himself with them, because he too is suffering from a late innovation of a different sort.10 Also the reference to the war of the theaters may remind the Globe audience that they are witnessing symbolically another kind of theatrical warfare on the stage of Denmark. At any rate, Hamlet likes honest actors because feigning is their job (as it is now his own) and has for its object, ideally at least, the revelation of truth, so that, from one point of view, a bond of sympathy exists between him and them. But their profession also suggests to him the symbolic link between acting and the hypocrisy of the real world which so disgusts him, and he comments bitterly on this idea by drawing a parallel between the fickleness of the public's response to good and bad acting and the fickleness of Danish subjects to a good and bad king (II.ii.378-382). In both cases, fashionable appearance rather than true worth is the criterion of value. Polonius, of course, though he is indeed an actor in the world of hypocrisy and likes to account himself a critic of the drama, sees no such fine distinctions, as he proves a little later by his reaction to the player's speech. For him theatrical art is just make-believe.

The players enter and Hamlet asks for a taste of their quality, specifying a particular speech which he loves from “Aeneas' tale to Dido”. The significance of this speech and its content are, of course, integral to the theatrical symbolism of the play. Professor Levin has already given it such exhaustive analysis in the essay previously cited11 that I should only be repeating him to discuss the matter at length. It is necessary to point out, nonetheless, that this episode constitutes another of our plays-within-the-play, with this difference—that the artifice here is quite literal as well as figurative in effect.12 Hamlet begins to recite the speech and the players and Polonius serve as audience. After thirteen lines, Hamlet breaks off, directing the first player to continue, so that the audience-actor relationship is reversed on the stage. The fact that Hamlet himself gives part of the speech indicates how closely he identifies himself and his own situation with its content; for the lines dramatize for him, both through contrast and parallelism, the very feelings about which he is otherwise constrained to be silent—grief for his murdered father, his mother's lack of grief, his uncle's cruelty, and the pressing necessity for revenge. Not only does the speech make real to him “the very age and body of the time”, revealing, as the Ghost had done, truth beneath the appearances of things; it also forces upon him the
depressing realization that the player's speech was but a “dream of passion”, a mere fiction, whereas his own motive for passion is horribly real. Art is seen, then, as having both more and less reality than life itself, and our relation to Hamlet is precisely analogous to Hamlet's relation to the player. Hence the speech provides Hamlet with a cue for action. Stepping once more out of his role as actor (by convention of the soliloquy), Hamlet clarifies the meaning of the player's speech to the audience and tells them that the play's the thing wherein a player-king will catch the conscience of a real king. But even as he moves towards action, he is encircled by more doubts:

The spirit that I have seen
May be a devil; and the devil hath power
T' assume a pleasing shape. ...

(II. ii. 626-628)

The Ghost, too, may be a kind of “actor”. We are caught up in paradox within paradox. As commentator, Hamlet stands upon a stage in London; as tragic protagonist, standing upon a stage in Denmark, he wrestles with three worlds of seeming, and looks backward to the Ghost as he looks forward to the play.

In the third act, which contains the play's crisis and recognition, the theatrical stratagem, up to now so carefully rehearsed, are brought to the test of actual performance. Mask confronts mask under conditions of intensified psychological pressure; thus “acting” turns to action, and the faces behind the masks are made (partially, at least) to disclose themselves to each other. After Claudius, with ironic satisfaction, receives from Rosencrantz and Guildenstern the news of Hamlet's interest in the players, the first bout of the “mighty opposites” follows immediately as Polonius and the king withdraw behind the arras to observe Hamlet's behavior towards Ophelia. Polonius gives a last stage-direction to his daughter:

Read on this book,
That show of such an exercise may colour
Your loneliness.

(III. i. 44-46)

Even as he does so, Polonius' recognition of duplicity provides Claudius with a flash of insight into his true self which prepares us for his breakdown later. Characteristically, the first proof of the king's guilt comes in the form of the aside, the usual device (along with the soliloquy) which Shakespeare employs to make it clear that the actor has temporarily dropped his persona: “O, 'tis too true! / How smart a lash that speech doth give my conscience!” (III.i.49-50).

Already the disclosures are beginning. Hamlet's soliloquy intervenes before Polonius' prearranged “act”, and the prince (again as commentator) states in more fundamental terms than before the deeply rooted conflicts of being and not being, of appearance and reality. The “nunnery scene” itself reveals to Claudius that “love” is not the cause of Hamlet's madness; his suspicions about the nature of Hamlet's attitude towards him are strengthened, and he therefore determines to send his nephew to England, since “Madness in great ones must not unwatch'd go” (III.i.196). To Ophelia, who takes the “antic disposition” for genuine lunacy, the scene is also a revelation, though a very partial one. It turns her eyes upon herself, showing her the hopelessness of her love. For the audience in the pit, it portends her eventual collapse. What is pretense for Hamlet will be all too real for her. After the “show” is over, Polonius comes out from behind the arras. But he would pry yet deeper into dangerous secrets, and now he plans what is to be his last theatrical venture—the closet scene.

Hamlet's advice to the players underscores the difference between good and bad acting and states the principle (which we are about to see operating in The Murder of Gonzago) of theater as the reflection of inner truth. All the while, Hamlet, like the player he advises, is learning to “Suit the action to the word …” (III.ii.19). Before
the play scene, however, Hamlet has his brief interview with Horatio, who exists outside the world of hypocrisy and symbolizes the kind of human relationship where truth resides divorced from “acting”. Now the “mouse-trap” itself begins—the crux of theatrical symbolism in which the two great opponents face each other, each playing the dual role of actor and audience. The relationship is very complex. Claudius, himself, is actor to Hamlet and the others of the court audience, but he is also spectator to the actors of the “mouse-trap”. Hamlet is also pretending; he wears his “antic” mask to Claudius and the others, but at the same time he is carefully observing the players' performance and that of Claudius which the play-within-the-play will presumably affect. Audience watches audience. The observed are the observers and the observers are the observed. Meanwhile the theater audience is identifying itself with all these points of view at once. At the crucial moment, Claudius cracks under the strain, revealing his guilt. Ironically he calls for light, as he tries desperately to retreat into his world of moral darkness. This constitutes the major disclosure of the act, and Hamlet has triumphed in a way, for he now knows what he had only suspected before. But he has also exposed himself, for Claudius is beginning to see through Hamlet's mask too. The player-king has ironically stated the truth of the situation for both segments of the stage audience: “Our wills and fates do so contrary run / That our devices still are overthrown … (III.ii.221-222). Hamlet's strategy is defensive—to draw the enemy into his own territory—but after he has done so, pretense alone will no longer suffice. On both sides of the conflict, there is now the necessity to do.

The remainder of the third act is devoted to a few lesser skirmishes and Claudius' soliloquy, which manifests his own tragic inner division as a self-aware actor. Hamlet again (more explicitly this time) exposes the hypocrisy of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern by showing them that to play upon him “is as easy as lying” (III.ii.372), and Polonius, who follows their appearance on the stage, is made the unconscious victim of his own “seeming” through the comic dialogue on camels, weasels, and whales (III.ii.394-399). Thus the appearance-reality theme is stated throughout the tragedy in almost all of the character relationships and strands of plot, extending in an emotional spectrum which includes a great variety of “serious” and comic colors. Hamlet ends the scene as chorus, stating his willingness to obey the Ghost and analyzing his function as “actor” in the approaching encounter with the queen: “I will speak daggers to her, but use none. / My tongue and soul in this be hypocrites …” (III.ii.414-415).

In Claudius' long and self-searching soliloquy (III.iii.36-72), we see that the enforced hypocrisy which is destroying Hamlet is also destroying the king. He, too, is caught between the irreconcilable claims of this world and the next. Pretense will only do for this life: “… 'tis not so above. / There is no shuffling; there the action lies / In his true nature. …” But he has chosen his role, and he must act it out to the world, however transparent it may be to heaven. Hamlet enters and faces the problem of whether or not to kill him now. As Claudius struggles vainly to reconcile earthly sin with his consciousness of heavenly judgment, Hamlet struggles to reconcile passion with reason. Deciding for the latter, he moves on to his mother's closet and another “staged” episode, which, like the play-within-the-play, will result in a disclosure of truth.

Polonius has again set up the “scene”, and he is ready (once more from behind the arras) to watch Gertrude play her assigned part. Hamlet's entrance, however, suddenly reverses the whole proceeding, and he plays an unexpectedly active performance to them. Polonius cries out in surprise. The wily actor dies ironically as audience to his own play, and the queen has her eyes turned upon her inner self, even as Claudius had been similarly tormented by the “mouse-trap”. When the Ghost appears in this scene, Gertrude does not see it, continuing to think of Hamlet's madness as real. Thus the queen, too, is involved in the illusion-reality dilemma, and this may be Shakespeare's way of dramatizing the fact that she is so used to corrupt appearances that she still cannot recognize the truth when it is present. Hamlet must teach her dramatically the difference between true and false illusion by means of the two portraits. The final irony is that Gertrude, when she is made to realize the truth about herself, must immediately reassume her mask. To be sure, she will now “act” for the sake of virtue. But the pretense must go on, and for Claudius she will have to wear the same costume. Gertrude, too (like both Hamlet and Claudius), must continue to live upon the world's stage.
Act IV combines play-acting with real acting. Gertrude relates the events of the closet encounter to Claudius in her new role. Claudius sends Hamlet to England, arranging for a little tragedy there with an actual victim as protagonist, but Hamlet unexpectedly changes the ending and returns to Elsinore. Fortinbras’ army moves against Poland, and the innocent go to their deaths “for a fantasy and trick of fame” (IV.iv.61). The feigned madness of Hamlet produces real madness in Ophelia, and her sad performance seems to the queen “prologue to some great amiss” (IV.v.18). Laertes returns, prepared in his rage to act openly, but is wooed to the king’s side by a masterfully controlled bit of “seeming” and then involved in the plan for another dramatic production (the fencing match) in which the actor is to show himself his “father’s son in deed / More than in words” (IV.vii.126-127). Claudius emphasizes the necessity to play the part well:

If this should fail,  
And that our drift look through our bad performance,  
'Twere better not assay'd.

(IV. vii. 151-153)

The act ends with Gertrude reciting to the stage audience an elegy on Ophelia's death in which artifice and sincerity are one.

In the last act of the play, all the paradoxes of appearance and reality merge and are mysteriously resolved in death. This final harmony is ironically foreshadowed in the graveyard where Hamlet looks upon the skull of Yorick and the court buries Ophelia. In the end, all appearances come to dust; the actors on the world’s stage must have exits as well as entrances, and let them paint an inch thick, to this favor they must come. The joking of the clowns gives a tragi-comic emphasis to the contrast between the hypocrisies of life and the realities of death. By a fantastic paradox, Death, the leveler, makes a bid to social appearances and distinctions: “… the more pity that great folk should have count'nance in this world to drown or hang themselves more than their even-Christen” (V.i.28-30). Hamlet’s relation to the grave-digger (the one who remains) is at first that of audience and later, when he engages him in conversation, that of actor, for the clown does not identify him. There is a grim irony on the other side too, since Hamlet does not know that the grave before him is to be Ophelia's. The theater audience, again, sees the relationship from both points of view at once. Then Hamlet (in his remarks to Horatio and the address to the skull) performs the choric function, generalizing on death in terms of the dead—Yorick, Caesar, and Alexander (V.i.202-239).

As the funeral procession enters, Hamlet and Horatio withdraw, playing unseen audience to the ceremony in which the others take parts. Laertes usurps the stage and vents his grief with the passionate diction and exaggerated gesture of the “deep tragedian”. Hamlet reacts to the performance as if a bad actor were tearing a passion to tatters, and the reaction in turn impels him to outdo the “actor” in a dramatization of his own grief—to express theatrically the passion that circumstance has heretofore compelled him to repress: “Nay, an thou'lt mouth, / I'll rant as well as thou” (V.i.306-307). The leaping into the grave is symbolic too, for the histrionics point forward to a final “scene” from which neither actor will emerge alive. The king’s words are more prophetic than he knows: “This grave shall have a living monument. / An hour of quiet shortly shall we see …” (V.i.320-321).

The following episode discovers Hamlet narrating his sea adventure to Horatio by means of theatrical imagery:

Being thus benetted round with villanies,  
Or I could make a prologue to my brains,  
They had begun the play.

(V. ii. 29-31)
The metaphor summarizes Hamlet's tragic predicament and indicates his progress through the drama—the symbolic advance from thought to action which we have noted. In the soliloquy which concludes Act II, Hamlet had said, we remember: “About, my brain! Hum, I have heard / That guilty creatures, sitting at a play, / Have … Been struck so to the soul that presently / They have proclaim'd their malfoctions …” (II.ii.616-620). Preparing for the “mouse-trap”, Hamlet had been concerned with “playing” in the aesthetic sense and its symbolic relation to his own spiritual conflict. Now, he is caught in a play which he did not begin. He finds himself upon a real stage where the symbols are turning to facts and the actors are making their exits one by one. Polonius and Ophelia have already made theirs, and now Rosencrantz and Guildenstern “go to ’t”.

Hamlet now expresses regret to Horatio for having forgotten himself to Laertes, for “… by the image of my cause I see / The portraiture of his” (V.ii.77-78). Both are faced with the problem of avenging a murdered father. As the Pyrrhus speech and the Murder of Gonzago had shown the observers their inner selves, so now Hamlet learns to adjust himself to Fortune's role by an increase in imaginative sympathy for the roles of others. This growth is conveyed by his cheerful reception of Laertes' challenge, brought to him by Osric (who ironically says of Laertes that “his semblable is his mirror”, V.ii.123), and by his recognition that “to know a man well were to know himself” (V.ii.145). This is the quietness of mind which allows him to observe that “the readiness is all” (V.ii.234).

The final episode of the play takes the form of another “show”, a sports event in which the stage audience, as well as the performers, unite ironically in the same last “act” which is death. It is noteworthy that the fencing match begins with an attempted reconciliation and that Hamlet, in his speech to Laertes, speaks both truth and falsehood at once. In his apology, Hamlet lies about the cause of his outburst and pleads his madness, for he must continue to “act” so long as the revenge remains unaccomplished. But he also speaks from his heart, for he bears Laertes no enmity. Sincere emotion radiates through the persona. Here, then, the actor is seen explicitly as symbol of the man divided against himself, the man who would play one role but is forced by fate to play another. Moreover Hamlet's “disclaiming from a purpos'd evil” reminds us again of the theatrical terms in which the final spectacle is to be witnessed by his reference to “this audience” (V.ii.251-252). “Audience” here refers to the court, but, by extension, of course, to the theater audience as well.

As the performers “prepare to play”, Claudius (now in the double role of actor and audience) announces a ceremonial accompaniment to the bout. He will drink to Hamlet, and the kettles, trumpets, and cannon will echo each other in a chain of cosmic reverberations. Ironically, these are to be a death knell rather than a proclamation of victory, and they therefore point ahead to the final words of the play, “Go, bid the soldiers shoot.” The fencing match proceeds, but not according to plan, for “acting” is no protection from the mysterious operations of chance. What begins as “entertainment” ends in a spectacle of death. The illusion becomes reality suddenly and in violence. Gertrude drinks the poisoned cup before Claudius can properly warn her; that he does not snatch it from her hands shows us not only his steel nerves but that he, like Hamlet, must play out his role to the end. Laertes wounds Hamlet with the unbated rapier (as prearranged by the royal stage-manager), but the foils are mistakenly exchanged, and the actor-son, like his actor-father, is justly killed by his own treachery. The masks drop off, and for the first time in the play the characters confront each other without disguise. Laertes lays bare the stratagem; Hamlet immediately carries out his revenge upon the king and exchanges forgiveness with his informant. Shakespeare tells us what our emotional reaction to this holocaust should be by the dramatic terminology in which Hamlet's dying speech is couched, for we are now at one with the stage audience:

You that look pale and tremble at this chance, 
That are but mutes or audience to this act, 
Had I but time (as this fell sergeant, Death, 
Is strict in his arrest) O, I could tell you—But let it be.
Even in death, Hamlet is eager to speak—to “tell all” like a player, to uncover the truth for those that remain. And so he deputizes Horatio, whom he wears in his heart of hearts, as official epilogue for the drama:

Absent thee from felicity awhile,
And in this harsh world draw they breath in pain,
To tell my story.

When Fortinbras and the ambassadors enter as audience to the tragic spectacle, Horatio fulfills Hamlet's urgent wish. As Cunningham has noticed (p.33), it is almost as if Horatio were speaking the prologue to the play we have already witnessed:

... give order that these bodies
High on a stage be placed to the view;
And let me speak to th' yet unknowing world
How these things came about. So shall you hear
Of carnal, bloody, and unnatural acts;
Of accidental judgments, casual slaughters;
Of deaths put on by cunning and forc'd cause;
And, in this upshot, purposes mistook
Fall'n on th' inventors' heads. All this can I
Truly deliver.

Fortinbras answers:

Let us haste to hear it,
And call the noblest to the audience.

The play ends as it had begun—in terms of the theatrical symbol: “Bear Hamlet like a soldier to the stage ...” (V.ii.407). An actor-audience beholds an actor-spectacle upon a scaffold. Through death, the conflicting worlds of “seeming” and “being” coincide; Hamlet and the Ghost are strangely united as we become one with the living actors on the stage. Distinctions are intentionally blurred in the tragic mystery of art. As we are drawn emotionally into this union, we gain a deepened awareness that we, too, are actors playing roles and that our world is a theater. We know that

... the great globe itself,
Yea, all which it inherit, shall dissolve,
And, like this insubstantial pageant faded,
Leave not a rack behind. We are such stuff
As dreams are made on, and our little life
Is rounded with a sleep.

(The Tempest IV. i. 153-158)

Notes

1. My citations throughout are to The Complete Works of Shakespeare, ed. G. L. Kittredge (Boston, 1936).


Properly speaking, the device of play-within-play adds another plane of reality, making the response a triple or (if the anagogical level is included) a quadruple one. Looked at in this way, the gradations of actuality resemble a Platonic ladder, for the play-within-play is an image of an image of an image. Real actors pretend to be actors entertaining an actor-audience, who, in turn, entertain a real audience, who are metaphorically actors on the world's stage and hence "walking shadows" of an ultimate cosmic reality, of which they are but dimly aware. In reverse, the movement can be graphed as follows: ULTIMATE REALITY—ACTUAL WORLD—PLAY WORLD—PLAY-WITHIN-PLAY-WORLD.

I am indebted for some of the ideas in this essay to Mr. H. V. D. Dyson of Merton College, Oxford. See especially "The Emergence of Shakespeare's Tragedy", *Proceedings of the British Academy*, XXXVI (1950), 69-93.


Ulysses describing Achilles as an actor (*Troilus and Cressida* I. iii. 151-158), Buckingham satirizing the "ham" (*Richard III*, III. v. 5-7), and Hamlet giving advice to the players (*Hamlet* III. ii. 2-3) are typical examples.

Hamlet, of course, has the distinct advantage in this contest of acting. He knows, or rather, strongly suspects Claudius' secret, but the king is kept guessing about Hamlet until the "mousetrap" and even then, he is not sure how much his nephew knows.

Even Polonius can see a ray of truth through Hamlet's disguise, though the disguise itself deceives him: "How pregnant sometimes his replies are! a happiness that often madness hits on, which reason and sanity could not so prosperously be delivered of" (II. ii. 211-213).

It is very possible that Shakespeare reinforced the connection at this point by another actual allusion to the Globe theater, the emblem of which is traditionally thought to have been a figure of Hercules carrying the world on his shoulders: "Ham. Do the boys carry it away? Ros. Ay, that they do, my lord—Hercules and his load too" (II. ii. 376-377). If so, the effect would be to enhance audience participation in the symbolism.

See note 6 above.

Kittredge notes in his edition that the exaggerated style of the speech itself is quite necessary to preserve the distinction between the two fictional levels of art and art-within-art.

To achieve this symbolic effect in modern production, the actor who plays the Ghost should actually appear upon the stage. The audience knows by this time that he is neither a figment of Hamlet's imagination nor a "goblin damned" but a reality—and so does Hamlet himself. To represent the prince as having some kind of special X-ray vision violates the whole intention of the scene, for if the audience does not share the spectacle, they are put most awkwardly in the position of sharing the queen's moral blindness. The multi-consciousness must be able to operate freely.

J. V. Cunningham in *Woe or Wonder* (Denver, 1951), pp. 18-19, points out that the word *act* often has the special significance of "chance" or "fortune" in contexts of tragic catastrophe. The theatrical connotation, however, is present too.

Since this essay was accepted for publication, two other studies have appeared that in part anticipate my own conclusions: G. C. Thayer, "*Hamlet*: Drama as Discovery and as Metaphor", *Studia Neophilologica*, XXVIII, 118-129; and Ann Righter, *Shakespeare and the Idea of the Play* (Cambridge, 1962). Miss Righter's valuable book treats the development of the actor-audience relationship from the beginnings of English drama and analyzes the significance of the play metaphor throughout Shakespeare's works.
In the following essay, Taylor contends that the main conflict within Hamlet is between man as fate's victim and man as the master of his destiny. Taylor further argues that this conflict reflects the confusion in ethical and religious thinking that pervaded Shakespeare's time.

In our over-riding concern, as literary critics, with the drama and the poetry of the early part of the seventeenth century, we often lose sight of the fact that neither the drama nor the poetry was the staple reading diet of the average “middle-class” Elizabethan. A glance at Louis B. Wright's *Middle-Class Culture in Elizabethan England* is revealing. We see that what, in particular, concerned such an individual were tracts devoted in some way or other to self-improvement. Such a concern involved the promulgation and dispensing of a host of essays dealing with the numerous ethical problems social mobility produces. Above all, religious writings dealt not so much with theological cruxes as with problems of everyday morality. In an article devoted to religious writings, Wright notes:

… we are more interested in Shakespeare's dramatic development than in the career and influence of his contemporary, the Reverend William Perkins: but for every Elizabethan who saw or read one of Shakespeare's plays, a hundred bought and read Perkins’ sermons.

He adds:

One fact that cannot be emphasized too often is that the most popular sermons were the least controversial; hence many puritan preachers—and Perkins is a good example—who stuck to exhortations to godliness and discourses on practical ethics were read by all sects. The reading public was less interested in theology than in ethics.¹

It is the phrase “practical ethics” which is interesting. In a world where the possibilities for different and new kinds of social action seemed to be increasing daily, there was an awareness that traditional morality was not adequate to meet the new demands. At the same time, some problems, because of their very nature, remained unchanged (man's relationship with God, the meaning of death, etc.). Theologians, whatever their denomination, were at pains to emphasize that men may, in their pride, confuse their right to make decisions in secular matters with a right to debate questions concerning the faith. As Roland Frye points out, Luther, Calvin and Hooker were at one in emphasizing this distinction.² A new morality, then, would have to take cognizance of traditional problems while being sufficiently flexible to be able to deal with the growing realization of the almost unlimited power of man *qua* man. The most delicate aspect of such a synthesis was that of definition: how does one define, and hence limit, man's power, to avoid the accusation of an enroachment upon God's province? Any new ethic had to steer clear of the possible charge of blasphemy.

In the majority of the religious writings of this time there is, above all, the demonstration of an acute concern for this problem, and a patent failure to deal with it in a lucid or definitive manner. There is a blurring of focus, a casuistry which obsfucates. The problem is most clearly stated by a writer not primarily concerned with religion, Machiavelli. He notes:

I am not unaware that many have held and hold the opinion that events are controlled by fortune and by God in such a way that the prudence of men has no influence whatsoever. Because of this, they could conclude that there is no point in sweating over things, but that one should submit to the rulings of chance. … Nonetheless, because free choice cannot be
ruled out, I believe that it is probably true that fortune is the arbiter of half the things we do, leaving the other half or so to be controlled by ourselves.3

The Elizabethans were greatly interested in the power invested in such a phrase as the “prudence of men”. They thought of its enactment in terms of “policy”. For example, in “The Whole Treatise of the Cases of Conscience”, one of Perkins’ sub-sections is headed: “Whether a man may lawfully and with good conscience use Policie in the affairs of this life?”4 He goes on to assert that the use of “policy” is essential in the affairs of this world, particularly in order to defeat one’s enemies or to determine truth. He even (in the best tradition of the ends justifying means) countenances the employment of “deceit”. He says that there is “a kinde of deceit called dolus bonus, that is, a good deceit, and of this kinde was the act of Josua.”5 Mosse adduces William Ames’s support for the principle of dolus bonus: “acts that do Sonare in malum, have an evill sound … but by some circumstances comming to them they are sometimes made good. …”6 For both Ames and Perkins the test of the bonus in the deceit is the intention of its author. Ames notes: “a good intention with other conditions doth make very much to the constitution of a good action” (p. 209). We may say that Perkins and Ames are attempting to come to terms with the reality of their times, but we can see immediately, I think, how their position is fraught with all kinds of difficulties, not the least being the question: who determines and how is it determined that the intention is good? Perkins emphasises four caveats to his acceptance of the use of deceit:

Nothing whatever must be done against the honor of God; nothing must be done to prejudice the truth, especially the truth of the Gospel; nothing must be wrought or contrived against the justice that is due to men; and lastly, all actions of policy must be such as pertain to our calling.7

The first and second caveats (the second in particular) are, even now, open to extremes of application. Who is to decide (and how) that the policy is “against the honor of God”? Is the “truth of the Gospel” so self-evident that we know immediately when a particular policy is contravening it? In a sense, the impossibility of an easy answer to these fundamental questions at that time is indicated by the outbreak of civil war in 1642.

The early part of the seventeenth century was a period of accelerated change causing confusion in ethical and religious thought. Such confusion is mirrored in the conflict in Hamlet, which, in turn, is reflected in the criticism of the play. For the quantity of commentary on Hamlet is a symptom (if nothing else) of a particular kind of baffled concern for the play's meaning. It might be argued that the confusion created by the perversity of this vast body of contradictory theory reveals the mode of ambiguity intended by Shakespeare. There is some justification, with regard, say, to Antony and Cleopatra, for us to be, to paraphrase Keats, negatively capable, and not to reach irritably after fact and reason. But with Antony and Cleopatra, the ambiguity is not a misleading one. We are reminded continually of the contradictoriness of the response of the protagonists to their dilemma, not simply by what they say and do about it, but by the play's dialectic. If at the close we are left undecided as to the reality, say, of Antony's and Cleopatra's love, such indecision is an integral part of the direction of the total meaning of the play. Stressing the difficulty of a simple judgment of Antony and Cleopatra seems to me to be one of Shakespeare's purposes. Even with Antony and Cleopatra, however, one is unsure of the extent to which deliberate ambivalence is intended. Cleopatra's dialogue with Dolabella in the last act, for example, seems to hint at a positive resolution of the play's essential ambiguity. Her definition of the “reality” of her conception of Antony is couched in a verse whose density reveals Shakespeare writing on a level significantly different in quality from that of the generally exclamatory nature of the exchanges between the protagonists. When she says

... Nature wants stuff
To vie strange forms with fancy; yet, t'Imagine
An Antony were nature’s piece 'gainst fancy,
Condemning shadows quite.
the verse has a serious complexity of total involvement, and the theme is one which has obsessed Shakespeare from the writing of Venus and Adonis to The Winter's Tale. It is almost as though at this final point Shakespeare wishes us to erase the play's central paradox from our minds, hinting, it seems, at some kind of Platonic essence superior to the rough-and-tumble of the political conflict and the superficially treacherous nature of the love-affair.

Although this is provocative enough, it is not sufficient to shift the emphasis from the undecided to the decisive. Such a hint becomes a fragment in the kaleidoscopic structure of the play adding an essential qualification to any simplified description of Antony's nature. It is, of course, primarily intended to balance Antony's own condemnation of himself, where he sees himself in a condition of incessant and meaningless transmutation like the 'vapour' which is sometimes

... like a bear or lion,
A tower'd citadel, a pendent rock,
A forked mountain, or blue promontory
With trees upon't that nod unto the world
And mock our eyes with air.

(IV.xiv.3-7)

I would argue, then, that a hesitancy in judgment on our part indicating a complex moral world is one of the effects aimed at in Antony and Cleopatra. However, so various is that world that the attempt (if there is one) to give it some kind of transcendental stability is almost completely unconvincing. One could not deny that a similar moral complexity is to be found in Hamlet. If we merely followed Hamlet's self-questioning we should be made adequately aware of the difficulty of straightforward judgments. But the rest of the play stresses insistently the interrogative mood. Doubt, hesitancy, suspicion are complemented inevitably by erroneous conclusions and mistakes in action. Unlike Antony and Cleopatra, however, there is not simply a hint of resolution of the dilemma: the resolution is stated in emphatic terms. In other words, the resolution, because of the emphasis placed upon it, is not caught up in the dominant mood of doubt and confusion which seems to be characteristic of Hamlet, but is an attempt to break through it to some kind of transcendental sanity. Cleopatra's description of Antony, if we were to take it as Shakespeare's final word, would, I believe, invalidate his presentation in the previous four acts. Such a resolution, if it were apart from the general tenor of the play, might give rise to an ambiguity which could be unsatisfactory, inconsequential. This is, in fact, my thesis with regard to Hamlet. We can see, I think, how such a thesis may be related to the shifting Elizabethan attitude to the nature and extent of man's power to determine the pattern of his life. The essential conflict in Hamlet, I believe, is that between man as victim of fate and as controller of his own destiny.

Critics have noticed, of course, Hamlet's change of heart on his return from England in the fifth act. Jean Calhoun, for example, notes:

Far more perplexing, really, than the delay is the final transformation of Act V. It is as if, by his almost miraculous escape from the English voyage, Hamlet has worked through his earlier doubts in a single experience of successful action, yet that very miraculousness has suggested to him the fallibility of human plans. On his return, he does not exude confidence in his ability to repeat his success. Instead, he seems full of the terrible sadness of a man who sees human impotence, rather than human power, in the haphazard working out of his own life.

Although Miss Calhoun sees the “transformation” as “perplexing” she does, in fact, explain it in terms of the reaction of a bruised psyche. If this explanation has the merit of simplicity it also suggests a too easy reliance on that kind of character criticism we associate with Bradley. More importantly, it must surely seem odd that
Shakespeare should rely upon an off-stage, reported action as a satisfactory explanation for what seems to be a complete volte-face on the part of his hero. Miss Calhoun indicates that she regards Hamlet's change of heart as momentous, but can find it easy to relegate the cause of it to what, to all intents and purposes, does not exist in the body of the play at all.

Hamlet's change of heart is indeed momentous. The first four acts of the play have stressed, with qualifications which I shall deal with later, the need for the play of human intellect on certain problems. Almost all the characters, Hamlet notably included, are frenetically involved in schemes of discovery. The first four acts are a complex of plot and counter-plot: a bewildering maze of spying and counter-spying where the general method is that of a complicated, and sometimes fiendish, intrigue. The method is pertinently described by Polonius in his advice to Reynaldo:

Your bait of falsehood takes this carp of truth,
And thus do we of wisdom, and of reach,
With windlasses, and with assays of bias,
By indirections find directions out.

(II.i.59-63)

The end (“the carp of truth”) justifies the means (“the bait of falsehood”). We might argue that Perkins' *dolus bonus* is here given its fundamental expression in the play. Polonius' description of himself as one of those who are “of wisdom, and of reach” is, of course, finely ironic. Nevertheless, we would say, with certain reservations, that such a description applies to the protagonist. Similarly, we can apply another statement of Polonius' credo to him. How much more appropriate would the following be from Hamlet:

If circumstances lead me, I will find
Where truth is hid, though it were hid indeed
Within the Centre.

(II.ii.157-9)

Much depends on what is meant by “truth”. For Polonius, as for Claudius, it consists of discovering the reason for Hamlet's behavior. For Hamlet the “truth” of the circumstances of his father's death is only a part of the search for some kind of all-containing “truth” which could explain the human predicament. The question, “To be or not to be”, with its brooding metaphysicality, is not one that could be asked by Polonius.

There seem, then, to be at least two kinds of “truth”—one local and contingent, the other essential and absolute—stated for us in Polonius' abstract formulation. The major qualitative difference between these truths may be a clue to Hamlet's abrupt change of heart in the fifth act, from an absorbed, frantic involvement in the pursuit of knowledge, to a stoic resignation in the inevitability of event. That is, Hamlet may be expressing the only possible stance to be taken when he realizes that, in pursuing the circumstances of his father's murder, he is moving towards some kind of fundamental questioning of inevitable Law, the danger of which Calvin, Luther and Hooker so constantly stress. James Feibleman has noticed an ethical duality in *Hamlet* which, he says, is dramatized in the self-questionings of the hero. On the one hand, there is the world of absolute, immutable values of which only Hamlet is really aware, and on the other, there is the world as it actually is with all its “imperfection and conflict” with which Hamlet has to contend. Feibleman goes on to say:

Let us suppose that he comprehends or, still better, that he feels the relationship between the two orders in terms of what-is and what-ought-to-be. The realm of being is the realm of what-ought-to-be; the realm of actuality or existence is the realm of what-is. Now, assuredly,
what-is is not altogether what-ought-to-be.\textsuperscript{11}

Perhaps Hamlet's change of heart is meant to convey an irrevocable limitation to man's capacity, unaided by the supernatural, to synthesize the two worlds. If this were the case, one would expect the first four acts of the play to prepare us adequately, in some way or other, for Hamlet's recognition of this incapacity expressed in his famous stoical remarks: “The readiness is all” and “There's a special providence in the fall of a sparrow”. Where, in effect, does the emphasis lie?

The first four acts are pervaded by a sense of man as agent of his own destiny.\textsuperscript{12} The stress is on the reality of man's capacity to find out truth even if it is hidden “Within the Centre”. Consequently, Elsinore is a-bustle with feverish activity, the only still center being the self-communings of Hamlet. The imagery of the play reflects the nature of this activity—its essential method. When Claudius employs Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to spy on Hamlet (“lawful espials”), Hamlet confronts them: “Why do you go about to recover the wind of me, as if you would drive me into a toil?” The metaphor from hunting reminds us of Polonius’ “windlasses” and “assays of bias”. Similarly, this emphasis on the policy of “indirection” is reflected in Hamlet's response to Claudius' device of sending him to England (“For the demand of our neglected tribute”) in the care of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to have him killed:

\begin{quote}
... let it work,  
For 'tis the sport to have the enginer  
Hoist with his own petar, and't shall go hard  
But I will delve one yard below their mines,  
And blow them at the moon: ...
\end{quote}

(III.iv.205-209)

We have, of course, to be aware of the note of hysteria in Hamlet's description of his activity as “the sport”—his energy is more frenzied than sporting—but the lines do reveal a certain delight in the pitting of his intellect against the wiles of his enemies. The complications of the devices to probe the heart of Hamlet's mystery reach a climax, after the failure of using Ophelia as bait and the pathetic death of the eavesdropping Polonius, in Claudius' plan to have Hamlet murdered by Laertes while ostensibly taking part in a fencing-match.

Claudius' intrigues fail. If these were the only ones, their failure would, in itself, point up the justice of abandoning a faith in the designs of existential man. But Hamlet, using the same deviousness as his antagonists, is eminently successful. Indeed, it is possible to see the unavailing plots of Claudius \textit{et al.} as a means of underlining the success that Hamlet enjoys. The parallelism between the methods employed by Hamlet and his opponents is striking, and has been commented on by W. V. Shepard:

That pattern is as follows: He lets his adversary attack first. Then, using the weapon of his adversary, he strikes swiftly home.

This happens not once, nor twice, but time and time again. We have noted above how Hamlet employed this device in his use of the words ‘son’, ‘common’, and ‘seems’. As he uses words, so he uses players; as he uses players, so he uses sailing craft; as he uses sailing craft, so he uses documents; as he uses fencing foils, so he uses poison.\textsuperscript{13}

But the similarity between the instruments to hand is outweighed by that of the general method—of “indirection”. The oblique approach is common to both camps. The machinations of “policie” are seen to be essential to the “affaires of this life”. Hamlet's two most important devices are his feigned madness and his use of the play “The Murder of Gonzago”, which he calls “The Mouse-trap”. Despite the storm of controversy over Hamlet's state of mind, we are never really allowed to forget the purpose his madness serves to
camouflage. Even Polonius sees some “method” there, while Guildenstern describes it as a “crafty madness”. Claudius, himself, is profoundly troubled:

Love! his affections do not that way tend;
Nor what he spake, though it lack'd a little,
Was not like madness. There's something in his soul
O'er which his melancholy sits on brood,
And I do doubt the hatch and the disclose
Will be some danger

(III.i.170-175)

Hamlet is occupied by his intrigue until his return from England. Even in the fifth act his account to Horatio of his outwitting of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern has a residual element of “the sport”. He describes the contents of the letter he forges from Claudius to the King of England:

An earnest conjuration from the King,
As England was his faithful tributary,
As love between them as the palm should flourish,
As Peace should still her wheaten garland wear
And stand a comma 'tween their amities,
And many such-like as-es of great charge,
That, on the view and know of these contents,
Without debatement further, more or less,
He should the bearers put to sudden death,
Not shriving time allow'd.

(V.ii.38-47)

The contrast between the polite flourishes of diplomacy with which the letter begins and the mercilessness of the final demand is contemptuous. Hamlet can still take a delight in this kind of manipulation.

The first four acts reveal, then, the major characters' concern (with the exception of Ophelia and Horatio) for an intrigue designed to increase their control over their own destiny. Only Hamlet, because he is in possession of information which places him in a superior position, has any real degree of success. We are, I think, made aware that even in the grubby world of the court of Elsinore it is possible, provided that the right method is used, for human ingenuity to tease out at least some of the truth of a situation however deceptive and misleading its appearance may be. Up to this point in Hamlet, Shakespeare's “preoccupation with man's subjection to illusion” seems to be stressing the potential in man as a rational creature to make a significant contribution to the direction of his fate, in a way which would have been understood by a writer like Perkins. The oblique, indirect method of discovery, with its important implications, is reflected in the play's language. In no other of Shakespeare's plays, it seems to me, is language used so self-consciously to disguise and reveal meaning at one and the same time. As one might expect, it is Hamlet, himself, who manipulates language in this manner most consistently. His situation forces him to make language a tool in his various schemes for probing, under cover of apparent irrelevance, the stances of his enemies. They are both mystified and made uncomfortable by his use of pun, oxymoron, nonsense, paradox. Hence, Hamlet's “wild and whirling words”, in particular, reflect both the problem (in their disguising meaning) and the pervasive method of solving the problem (by covert “indirection”). The obscurity of the language is portentous. One or two examples should make this clear. Consider, for example, his opening remark: “A little more than kin, and less than kind” (I.ii.65), or his baiting of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern: “I am but mad north-north-west; when the wind is southerly, I know a hawk from a handsaw” (II.ii.396-8), or his pert reply to their enquiry after Polonius: “The body is with the King, but the King is not with the body” (IV.ii.29-30). The obscurity of these apophthegms conceals for a time their ominous sense, although even in the theatre we are aware, to adapt a phrase of Knights's, of ‘a particular vibration in the saying'.
One might argue, however, that this particular mode of employing language is thrust upon Hamlet. The madness he feigns is indicated by the madness of his speech. We know that he is really sane; so we should not be surprised by the sense we find in the nonsense. But this use of language is not confined to the hero. It crops up time and again in situations which are sometimes comic, as with Polonius or the Gravediggers, and sometimes tragic, as with the madness of Ophelia. For example, Polonius makes nonsense of his definition of “wit” in the process of defining it, but at the same time, in his digression, touches on some of Hamlet’s and the play’s central concerns:

My liege, and madam, to expostulate
What majesty should be, what duty is,
Why day is day, night night, and time is time,
Were nothing but to waste night, day, and time;
Therefore, since brevity is the soul of wit,
And tediousness the limbs and outward flourishes,
I will be brief.

(II.ii.86-92)

Hamlet has, indeed, wasted “night, day, and time” wondering “What majesty should be, what duty is”. Polonius’ amusing elaboration delays the conveyance of his information, and confuses and exasperates his hearers; in the process of the elaboration, however, Shakespeare has reminded us of matters even more germane than the point Polonius is trying to make. If the absurdities of Polonius are an example of the comic use of the language of indirection, Ophelia’s language in her madness is an example of the tragic. We note that in her mad scene (Act IV, Scene v), her apparently inconsequential speeches are, in fact, emphasizing the themes of deception in love, the rankness of sexuality, the problem of identity, and the problem of knowing: all of which have been important elements in the meaning of the play as a whole. We would agree with Laertes, though perhaps with different considerations in mind, when he says of Ophelia’s talk: “This nothing’s more than matter” (IV.v.174). The Gentleman best sums up the effect of Ophelia’s madness:

... Her speech is nothing,
Yet the unshaped use of it doth move
The hearers to collection. They aim at it
And botch the words up fit to their own thoughts;
Which, as her winks and nods and gestures yield them,
Indeed would make one think there would be thought,
Though nothing sure, yet much unhappily.

(IV.v.7-13)

The language of the play, then, as well as the activities of the major characters, stresses the method of solution open to human agency. That is, the verse itself, in its play with meaning, is “acting out”, on a metaphorical level, the major characters’ involvement with the twists and turns of their intrigues. Intrigue and language fuse to underline the thesis that, in the “affaires of this life”, it is necessary to employ the “indirection” of “policy”. If it were not for the protagonist, these first four acts would be almost purely in the spirit of Marlowe with his absorption with willed purpose. The shift to a dependence on God’s providence which characterizes the fifth act would seem utterly out of place. There are, however, indications in these four acts of something beyond the boundaries of mere rationalism. Indeed, it is a consideration of these which informs the tension of Hamlet’s debates with himself. He sees himself, unlike the other characters, as an actor in a great universal drama as well as the chief figure in the specific drama of Revenge. Everything he does or does not do has the Universal as its framework of reference. He is, above all, aware of the limitations of human action when it has only the human intellect as its source of power. He is consistently dubious as to the correctness of what he is doing. He longs for death, but cannot kill himself, as he sees his death within the traditional context of the Christian conception of sin and punishment which causes him to wish that “the Everlasting had not fixed / His
canon 'gainst self-slaughter” (I.ii.131-132). Despite his involvement with his intrigues for establishing the truth and despite his success with them, he sees himself as the victim of a malicious Fortune, particularly in its calling him to perform the onerous duty of revenge:

The time is out of joint, O cursed spite,  
That ever I was born to set it right!  

(I.v.189-190)

This attitude is reiterated after his murder of Polonius:

I do repent; but heaven hath pleased it so,  
To punish me with this, and this with me,  
That I must be their scourge and minister.  

(III.iv.173-175)

This is not the place for an extended analysis of Hamlet's character, but we should bear in mind that his presentation is many-sided. There is much to condemn as well as to admire in what Shakespeare reveals of his hero. We might argue that one of his characteristic stances is that of self-doubt. He contrasts himself unfavorably with Horatio, the actor in the murder of Priam by Pyrrhus, and Fortinbras; but in all of these, even the one involving Horatio, there is some degree of self-deception involved. Much of his self-condemnation concerns his inability to take action, but we are made to see that this inability is Hamlet's strength, that, in the face of the naivety or Machiavellianism of an action taken by a Laertes or a Fortinbras, his determination to know the truth before he does anything makes him the ethical center of the play. It is possible, then, that Hamlet's despair is a result of that personal melancholy which Shakespeare is at pains to emphasize, that he is one of those “particular men” who “for some vicious mole of nature in them” are in a state of perpetual self-disgust. If this is so, then his resignation to the benevolent drift of events which is what he holds as his final attitude could, perhaps, be explained as merely another indication of his basic weakness.

But (as we are often reminded) Hamlet is more than Hamlet. We are, by now, aware of the general implications of Shakespeare's plays, of his concern with certain themes. It seems unlikely that Hamlet was intended purely as a psychological study of an individual, whatever his degree of fascination. It seems even more unlikely that Shakespeare intended Hamlet's “regeneration” as solely the concern of the protagonist, and not intimately linked with the meaning of the play as a whole. We cannot, I think, explain Hamlet's conversion in the way that we might explain the aberrational conduct of an Antony or a Cleopatra, where, anyway, such conduct is, as I have pointed out, part of the larger meaning of the play. I feel sure that we are meant to see Hamlet's adjustment as the only workable compromise. Are there, then, other indications in these first four acts of the inevitability of Hamlet's compromise? Do we get a sense, despite the placing of the emphasis that I have outlined above, of the rightness, say, of the following?

... let us know  
Our indiscretion sometimes serves us well,  
When our deep plots do pall, and that should learn us  
There's a divinity that shapes our ends,  
Rough-hew them how we will.  

(V.ii.7-11)

There is, I think, some general opposition (which we might call conservative) in the first four acts to the idea of man pitting himself against forces beyond his control. Hamlet's continued distraction at his father's death is criticized by Claudius and, although it is ironic that Claudius is the speaker, one can imagine an Elizabethan
audience responding to his commonsense stand:

For what we know must be and is as common
As any the most vulgar thing to sense,
Why should we in our peevish opposition
Take it to heart?

(I.ii.98-101)

Such a position is backed by Gertrude:

Thou know'st 'tis common, all that lives must die,
Passing through nature to eternity.

(I.ii.72-3)

To them, there is something almost blasphemous in Hamlet's continuing to question the workings of destiny. His “opposition” is “peevish” because he is apparently questioning the nature of things as they have been divinely ordained by God for the benefit of man. In his search for truth, Hamlet seems to be going “against the honor of God”. The Elizabethans would, presumably, react in a similar fashion to Polonius' solipsism:

This above all—to thine own self be true,
And it must follow, as the night the day,
Thou canst not be false to any man.

(I.iii.78-80)

Frye comments:

In Christian terms, the fault with such integrity as Polonius recommends is that it places man's reliance entirely upon himself, without reference to God. …

(P. 189)

There is, also, some support for Hamlet's heavy-hearted awareness of himself as a victim of a malicious fortune. A prevalent attitude towards the caprices of fortune in the play is condemnatory. She is twice referred to as a “strumpet”, at II.ii.228-247 (the conversation between Hamlet, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern), and at II.ii.515 (the First Player's speech recounting the death of Priam). The Player King, following the sentiments of Hamlet's soliloquies, succinctly states the problem:

This world is not for aye, nor 'tis not strange
That even our loves should with our fortunes change,
For 'tis a question left us yet to prove,
Whether love lead fortune, or else fortune love.

(III.ii.210-213)

Such a concern with the power of fortune is humorously debated by the Gravediggers, when they are considering, apropos of Ophelia, the distinctions between suicide and death by misadventure. The First Clown says:

Give me leave. Here lies the water; good. Here stands the man; good. If the man go to this water and drown himself, it is, will he, nill he, he goes,—mark you that? But if the water
come to him and drown him, he drowns not himself; argal, he that is not guilty of his own
death shortens not his own life.

(V.i.16-22)

The feeling that events are beyond the control of man is, I suppose, also suggested by the presence of the
Ghost itself, although the dramatic convention of the Ghost and Hamlet's unwillingness to accept it on
face-value alone, help to dissipate its power as controller of Hamlet's destiny. There are, too, other indications
of something taking place beyond the ken of man's intellect. The first scene of the play, for example, with its
emphasis on portent and mysterious sickness suggests, in a manner similar to the opening scene of Macbeth,
that an evil exists of a force incomprehensible to mere mortals. Nevertheless, none of this is sufficient to
dispel the impression of vitality that we get in man's capacity to overcome "the slings and arrows of
outrageous fortune".

Perhaps the most important qualification of this impression, is the continual presence, in some shape or form,
of death. Wilson Knight's essays on Hamlet in The Wheel of Fire are devoted to its "theme of death", and
Adrien Bonjour believes that death is the unifying "factor" in a "various" play.¹⁶ The orgy of deaths that
closes the play seems to bear witness to the fruitlessness of man's endeavor to control fate. But there is
paradox here too. It could be argued that Hamlet's submission to the inevitability of events is as much the
cause of the final catastrophe as are the bungling plots of Laertes and Claudius. Hamlet repudiates the
ominous "augury" he feels about the outcome of the fencingmatch:

Not a whit; we defy augury. There's 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 has aught of what he leaves, what is't to leave betimes?

(V.ii.230-235)

Such indifference to his suspicions would have made him the easy victim of the "indirections" of Rosencrantz
and Guildenstern in the third act. (It is interesting, incidentally, to note the way in which the structure of the
speech seems to work against the assertion of serenity it is apparently making. The logical play of "If it be
now," etc., is more in keeping with a mind still analytically probing, than with one at peace with itself. We
should contrast, perhaps, the plainness of Lear's acquiescence: "I am a very foolish, fond old man", King Lear
IV.vii.60-67).

Nevertheless, in these first four acts death and the concept of death are an essential part of the reality of
Hamlet's world. One can see how such an emphasis could lead to the stoic attitude. We might be made to
accept the proposition that an intrigue devoted to the discovery of truth would have to stop at the bourne from
which no traveller returns. The truth could simply be that, beyond a certain point, there can only be mystery.
Human ingenuity is irrelevant and pernicious in the world of the spirit. In effect, the concept of death is
presented as essentially mysterious, and the locus classicus for this is Hamlet's soliloquy "To be or not to be".
It could be argued also that the actual visitation of death in these first four acts (i.e. the pathetic madness and
death of Ophelia, and the death of Polonius) is a direct result of an involvement on Hamlet's part in his
attempt to control matters. Here again, however, we are aware that both of these deaths are a result of Hamlet
departing from his normal ethical scrupulousness and care in action. In the case of Ophelia, Hamlet's rejection
of her is based on the fallacy of arguing from the particular to the general. Gertrude's "rankness" becomes, for
Hamlet, the rankness of all women and as Ophelia is a woman she too must be condemned. In the case of
Polonius, we see Hamlet taking action in the manner of Laertes. His surrender to impetuosity is in vivid
contrast to that delicacy of judgment which prevents him from killing Claudius when the latter is apparently at
prayer and in a state of grace. These two tragic deaths, then, seem to underline the necessity of an elaborate,
careful analysis of circumstances and situation. Far from destroying the value of Hamlet's ethical hesitancy,
they serve to show that he is not hesitant, not scrupulous, enough. In the last analysis, they are very much part of the emphasis of these first four acts which I have discussed above.

My argument, then, is that the first four acts of Hamlet, in their emphasis upon “policie”, upon Hamlet's adroit use of the “prudence of men”, upon the bitter vitality in his taking up arms against his troubles, have only hinted at the possibility of his final stoicism. There is thus an abrupt, and to my mind disturbing, anagnorisis in Act V when Hamlet recognizes that the designs of “policie” are of no avail. Essentially, the problem is an aesthetic one, for we have not been made to feel the justification of Hamlet's final belief that there is an irrevocable limitation to a man's capacity to influence his destiny. Asserting that this in fact is the case is much less satisfying than convincing us through the play's dialectic that it must be the case. The consequent ambiguity, then, unlike that of Antony and Cleopatra, is not one that the play's structure persuades us is (unambiguously) inevitable.

As we have seen, this is not to say that Shakespeare was unaware of the problem. The opening scene of the fifth act, for example, serves to link that omnipresent concern with the finality of death demonstrated in the first four acts with Hamlet's acquiescence to the shaping divinity in the Play's final scene. The greater part of V.i, from the Gravediggers' emphasis on the “strength” of their “building” to Laertes' despair over Ophelia, underscores Hamlet's own awareness of the absoluteness of death, whose inevitability makes life's “quiddities” and “quillets” seem merely trivial. Fool, politician (i.e. schemer), lawyer, courtier, the matchless leader of men, the proud and beautiful woman all succumb to “Lady Worm” whose sovereignty is climactically rendered as Ophelia's cortege moves across the stage. If this, then, is the favor to which we all must come, Hamlet's impatience with Laertes' graveside protestations (for words are shadows of events which are themselves only shadows when compared with death's reality) is readily understandable.17

It seems likely, however, that no single explanation of Hamlet's change of heart will suffice. What may be of importance to notice is that this central dilemma in Hamlet is a version of the classic dilemma of the Revenge dramatist.18 Revenge drama, from The Spanish Tragedy to Middleton's and Rowley's The Changeling or Ford's The Broken Heart, reveals at best an equivocal attitude on the part of the playwright to revenge and revenger, for, although the revenger in his pursuit of revenge occupies an heroic position on the English stage at this time, he never enjoys unqualified approval however noble his cause. This reluctance to accept him accounts for a shift of emphasis from the presentation of the revenger as equivocal hero to that of him as unequivocal villain: a movement away from the Kydian formula for revenge to that first indicated in Marlowe's The Jew of Malta where Barabas stands as the prototype of the criminal avenger. Bowers notes:

This question outlines in sharp relief the fundamental problem facing every writer of revenge tragedy whose protagonist is a hero. The audience is sympathetic to his revenger so long as he does not become an Italienate intriguer, and so long as he does not revenge.

At the conclusion the audience admits its sentimental satisfaction with the act of personal justice but its ethical sense demands the penalty for the infraction of divine command.

(P. 95)

Beaumont's and Fletcher's The Maid's Tragedy (c. 1611) brings into prominence a solution adopted by later writers like Ford and Massinger, where the doctrine “vengeance appertaineth unto God only”19 is followed, and revenge left to Heaven. Such a shift in treatment is intimated, not only in Hamlet itself, but in the difference between the two main sources for Shakespeare's play, the narratives of Saxo Grammaticus and Belleforest. Again, Bowers notes:

The difference in spirit between the two narratives, however, is distinct. Saxo, telling his primitive tale, is never in doubt about the justness of the revenge, or, indeed, of any other
revenge in his history. Belleforest, not at all influenced by the pagan Scandinavian tradition, is divided between his Renaissance French appreciation of a bella vendetta and the Christian doctrine that all revenge must be left to God.

(P. 87)

Shakespeare, then, may, in Hamlet, be reflecting a conventional ethical duality common to significant revenge plays. For the full tragic effect, Hamlet must die in innocence, uncharacteristic of him though this state may be. If he does not do so, his death, like Ophelia's, may be marred by an unsympathetic reservation of judgment on the part of his audience—hardly an appropriate response for a tragedy. Whether or not Ophelia committed suicide is of no great importance. What is important is Shakespeare's concern for the effect of the suspicious circumstances of her death. The Clown asks: “Is she to be buried in Christian burial that wilfully seeks her own salvation?” (V.i.1-2). We ourselves witness her Christian burial, but one without the full solemnity and rich ceremony that a Christian of her rank would normally enjoy. Such an “churlish” attitude by the church is not dissimilar to the Elizabethan audience's ambivalent response to the position of the avenger in Revenge Drama: grudging, wary acceptance. Such an audience would, one imagines, believe that Hamlet dies into “felicity” and that flights of angels will sing him to his rest but only if he, like some of his fellow avengers, abjures his personal vendetta. Only then, it seems, can Fortinbras be justified in treating Hamlet as the noble warrior:

Let four captains
Bear Hamlet, like a soldier, to the stage,
For he was likely, had he been put on,
To have prov'd most royally; and, for his passage,
The soldiers' music and the rites of war
Speak loudly for him.

(V.ii.406-411)

“Sweets to the sweet” for Ophelia and “Soldiers' music and the rites of war” for Hamlet: we would agree that they deserve no less. But in Hamlet's case, the dignified simplicity of his final exit is in ironic contrast with our previous experience of his living, and in our awareness of this irony in the play's dying moments is contained that bewilderment with Hamlet which this paper has attempted to explore. Fortinbras remains however—and perhaps this is the greatest irony of all.

Notes

3. “XXV. How far human affairs are governed by fortune, and how far fortune can be opposed”, The Prince, translated by George Bull (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, 1961).
7. Ibid., p. 317. Cf. Martin Luther's “Means are not to be neglected, but we are to employ those means which it is possible for us to use”. Exp. Gen. xxxii: 6-8, in What Luther Says: An Anthology, 3 vols., ed. Ewald M. Plass (St. Louis, 1959), II, 2437, and also cf. John Eliot, Discourses of Warre and Single Combat, by B. de Loque (1591), p. 52: “That vengence appertaineth unto God only. … Therefore it followeth, that whosoever do the reuenge himselfe, committeth sacrilege. … That seeing
the wrong that our neighbour doth, happeneth not without the prudence of god, it is not lawful for vs
to resist and withstand it by oblique and sinister meanes, and such as displease God."
8. All quotations from Shakespeare are from the New Cambridge Edition edited by W. A. Neilson and
C. J. Hill.
9. For a good analysis of the play along these lines, see Harry Levin's The Question of “Hamlet”
S. F. Johnson's “The Regeneration of Hamlet” in Shakespeare Quarterly [SQ], III (1952), 187-207,
where he defends Hamlet's belief in providence in the following terms:

Briefly, Hamlet felt, before he left Denmark, that all occasions informed against him
(IV.iv.32, ommitted from Folio); while at sea, on the contrary, all occasions informed
in his favour.

(P. 199)

Johnson feels that any uneasiness as to the regeneration is an unnecessary creation of the critics:

The desperation ascribed to Hamlet is the existentialist despair of critics who must at
all costs believe in their own free will. Hamlet is their scape-goat.

(P. 194)
12. For this terminology, cf. John Lawlor's chapter on Hamlet, “Agent or Patient”, in his book The Tragic
14. If this analysis is acceptable, then there is no delay in Hamlet, unless we wish to describe Hamlet's
great concern for the truth as constituting such. It seems to me, however, that any necessary
condition for an action cannot constitute a delayal of that action. Indeed, there has been much unenlightened
discussion of this problem, and it is with a sense of relief that one turns to Philip Edwards' sensible
description of the problem of delay in The Spanish Tragedy which, mutatis mutandis, can be as well
applied to Hamlet:

That Hieronimo's conscience should accuse him for being tardy (III.xiii.135) is a
measure only of the stress he is under and the difficulties he faces, and of the depth of
his obligation; that Bel-imperia and Isabella should speak of delay (III.iv and
IV.ii.30) is a measure only of their understandable impatience and does not mean that
Hieronimo could have acted more quickly. It is the sense of delay which is real, and
not delay itself. Hieronimo does everything possible as quickly as possible.
“Introduction”, The Revels Plays

17. It is interesting that the verbal dexterity espoused by Hamlet in the first four acts is abjured by him in
this final act. At first, Hamlet is jocular, as with the Gravedigger: “How absolute the knave is: We
must speak by the card, or equivocation will undo us” (V.i.148-9). His comment on Osric (despite his
own satirical indulgence in Osric's language) is more pointed:

Thus had he … only got the tune of the time and outward habit of encounter; a kind
of yeasty collection, which carries them through and through the most fond and
winnower opinions; and so but blow them to their trials, the bubbles are out

(V.ii.196-202).

18. I am indebted for what follows to F. T. Bowers' *Elizabethan Revenge Tragedy 1587-1642* (Princeton, 1940), passim.

19. See Note 7.

**Criticism: Themes: Brent M. Cohen (essay date summer 1977)**


[In the following essay, Cohen demonstrates that the physical conditions and structure of the Elizabethan theater allowed Shakespeare to challenge his audience in unique ways, for example, by giving audience members a conflicted understanding of their role within the action of the play. Cohen emphasizes that in Hamlet, Shakespeare used the theater, theatricality, artifice, and performance to develop the audience's sense of self-consciousness; he did not use the theater, Cohen stresses, for the purposes of encouraging audience identification with the characters in the play.]

My title, which quotes Horatio's question to Fortinbras near the end of *Hamlet* (5.2.364), might stand for the kind of question the play frequently asks its audience. Critics, like Dover Wilson in *What Happens in Hamlet*, who attempt to resolve the uncertainties of what we do see, treat the audience as if, like Fortinbras, it somehow has been absent from the play it has just witnessed. That we continue to question what happens in *Hamlet* suggests, however, that it is less a question we should expect the play to answer than one it asks of us. Why after seeing *Hamlet* don't we trust ourselves to know what we have seen? Fortinbras' final comparison of Hamlet to a soldier (5.2.397) betrays the stake subsequent spectators have had in this question: usually with less apparent strain than Fortinbras who has just conquered Poland, we too would see ourselves in Hamlet. This expression of intuitive sympathy is at the heart of the criticism of the English Romantics who found in *Hamlet* their most convincing argument for empathy as the primary mode of literary response. To a large extent, the dramatic structure of the play corroborates the Romantic view: we become involved in *Hamlet* through Hamlet. In the soliloquies Hamlet puts himself in our confidence, seeks our approbation, and in turn we see him and others through his eyes. When he puts on the mask of “antic disposition” (1.5.172), we share his moral superiority, as we do when he denounces masks in favor of that “within which passeth show” (1.2.85) or when he sees through the masks of a world in which “one may smile, and smile and be a villain” (1.5.108). Even critics who emphasize the play rather than its prince usually assume that our response to the action does not differ significantly from Hamlet's. But there are exceptions, the Nunnery scene notably, where unable to distinguish self from mask, we find our sympathy for Hamlet in conflict with his actual behavior. In this essay, I propose to examine the effect of such double-binds on an audience in the theatre. My argument will be that the conditions of the Elizabethan theatre allowed Shakespeare to place demands on his audience that are foreign to a theatre based on Romantic assumptions; that in *Hamlet* Shakespeare does not use his theatre simply to encourage audience identification or to disclose the mysteries of subjectivity, but to explore the implications of producing plays for our entertainment.

I

I wish to begin with the sequence of scenes that follows Hamlet's decision not to kill Claudius at prayer, and to treat it as a paradigm of our changing involvement with Hamlet. In the Prayer scene, Hamlet worries not simply that Claudius' soul will go to heaven, but how such a revenge would be “scann’d” (3.3.75), how others would interpret his action. His casuistical address justifying his inaction to us and confiding his misgivings
sets up our expectation in the next scene, after he stabs Polonius, that again he will justify himself to us or show some misgivings. For the first time in the play, however, Hamlet does not directly address the audience at some point during his appearance. In fact, his promise to “answer well” (3.4.177) for Polonius' death is followed by perhaps the strangest action in the play—the hide-and-seek game. Hamlet's concealment of Polonius' body and his riddling taunts of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and then of Claudius, are as baffling to us as to Claudius and the court. Hamlet does not stop to answer our qualms as he exits lugging Polonius’ guts from Gertrude's bedroom, nor does he leave us with the clear sense we have had after every previous exit of what his next move will be. As Hamlet re-enacts the pattern of murder and concealment that had given him cause for revenge, he reaches both a moral and a strategic impasse. Claudius now takes over as master of stratagems, as Hamlet disappears first into the role of “antic disposition” and then from the stage for the next forty-five minutes. With our sudden loss of intimacy with Hamlet, we find ourselves on the peripheries of the action in which we have been so excitedly involved, and perhaps frustrated by the sense of futility and repetition that seems to take over the main action of the play.

As in the Nunnery scene, Hamlet's failure to acknowledge our discomfort succeeds in concealing his intentions but still invites our conjecture. Although Romantic critics were reticent about Polonius' murder, they believed that such “harsh and unpleasant” moments, in Charles Lamb's words, “are what we forgive afterwards and explain by the whole of his character.” We might explain Hamlet's concealment of Polonius' body as “madness,” as Hamlet later will, or as an avoidance of conscience. In either case, we explain Hamlet's action by explaining how we might have acted in such a situation. “It is we [the readers] who are Hamlet,” William Hazlitt wrote, articulating both the cardinal principle of psychological interpretation and the kind of response Hamlet would elicit from us. Perhaps since we have shared Hamlet's concerns throughout, after Polonius' murder we will attempt to re-involve ourselves in the action from Hamlet's point of view. But Hamlet's failure to show any of the misgivings he has shown previously in the play forces us to imagine the conflict we presume his “antic disposition” to conceal; we must substitute our conscience for his.

Romantic critics correctly realized that our interest in Hamlet depends on its hero's capacity to claim our interest in him, but Hamlet's prolonged and jarring denials of such natural human responses as grief, remorse, or responsibility for Polonius' death force us, at least momentarily, to look at him from the outside. Shakespeare, however, does not allow Hamlet's inaccessibility to exclude our interest and participation in the action, but utilizes our awareness of theatrical convention at once to deepen our sense of alienation and to complicate our sense of theatrical engagement. After Hamlet leaves the court for England, Claudius directly addresses the audience: “Do it England, / For like the hectic in my blood he rages, / And thou must cure me” (4.3.65-67). Although in appropriating Hamlet's habit of enlisting the audience in his cause Claudius only confirms our loyalty to Hamlet, he does succeed in re-involving us in the action, placing considerable stress on our immediate response. Claudius' address exacerbates our sense of dislocation in the scenes that follow Polonius' murder (where is Polonius? where is Hamlet?): are we in Denmark, where we see events as Hamlet sees them, or are we in England, in the distance of ironical awareness, and the loyal subjects of his proposed executioner? Unlike the more customarily off-handed, unproblematic ribbings of the audience that we find later, for example, in the Gravedigger's quip about English madness, here Shakespeare reminds his audience of its place in a London theatre at precisely the moment that our continued involvement in Hamlet is most precarious. Claudius' daring address creates a highly charged pause in which the audience must reconsider just how complicated and contradictory its involvement in the play might be.

Frequently in Hamlet, as in other plays, Shakespeare acknowledges the presence of his audience in the theatre. The kinds of involvement in the drama such disruptive tactics could create sharply distinguishes the theatrical conventions of illusion in the Elizabethan theatre from those of the Romantic theatre. Until William Poel revived the Elizabethan platform stage at the end of the century, 19th-century productions of Shakespeare were performed on a stage that was separated from its audience by a proscenium arch, and their goal, as Hazlitt wrote in his review of Edmund Kean's premier performance of Hamlet, was to mirror “what might have taken place at the court of Denmark 500 years ago” (V, 185). Attempts to enhance the illusion with
increasingly elaborate scenery and costuming, however, only increased the audience's awareness of the theatre—at least the awareness of such an avid theatre-going, closet critic as Lamb who rejected the principle introduced by the early Romantic actor John Phillip Kemble of correlating visual effects with subjective states of mind. When Lamb denounces the stage because its machinery “positively destroys the illusion” (I, 110) or because it “makes all things natural” (I, 111), he does not object to the principle of naturalism, only its imperfect implementation. Shakespeare was not concerned, according to Lamb, with the externals of place and gesture, but with the interiors of feeling, “grounded deep in nature, so deep that the depth of them lies out of the reach of most of us” (I, 102), and forever out of the reach of the stage.

Coleridge believed that this “depth” could be realized on Shakespeare's stage. Unencumbered by the spectacles of the Georgian stage, the bare, placeless Elizabethan stage permitted Shakespeare's poetry to exalt the imagination. Freed from the necessity to copy nature, Shakespeare could “appeal to that which we most wish to be when we are most worthy of being” —whether that be Henry V or Richard III. Dramatic illusions create a world of wish-fulfillment, in which, as in a “dream … the judgment is neither beguiled nor conscious of the fraud. … Whatever disturbs this repose of judgment by its harshness, abruptness, and improbability offends against dramatic propriety” (II, 258). Like Lamb (I, 98), Coleridge compares dramatic illusion to dreaming in order to describe the audience's suspension of judgment and its submission to the illusion. But he goes beyond Lamb when he complains that scene changes on the Georgian stage arouse us “from that delightful dream of our inner nature which in truth was more than a dream” (II, 79). The reveries produced by illusions, like dreams, Coleridge seems to say, originate somehow from our “inner nature” or what he calls, in his well-known definition of imagination, “the repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM.” According to Coleridgean epistemology, Hazlitt can say we are Hamlet because the self must predicate itself as an object, live in the object, in order to have knowledge of itself. In order to “make the object one with us, we must become one with the object—ergo, an object. Ergo, the object must be itself a subject” (BL, 183). By dissolving the boundaries of waking life that separate us from our “inner nature,” dramatic illusions fulfill Coleridge's philosophical dream of restoring the unity of subject and object, of inside and outside. In terms of the theatre, each member of the audience becomes like an actor who identifies with and embodies an heroic role.

Romantic writers wanted an heroic theatre that would ennoble its audience, but with the ambivalent exception of Hazlitt, they found the collectivity of the audience and the bodies of actors to inhibit that process of identification. They not only wanted to protect their favorite plays from the dross of performance, but to eliminate the audience altogether as a concept or as an epistemological category. Writing about Shakespeare with greatest conviction in the study, misinformed by a nostalgic sense of the Elizabethan stage, Romantic critics formed notions of dramatic illusion that ironically better fitted the design of the Georgian theatre. In the Georgian theatre, the actors behind the proscenium do not recognize the presence of the audience across the orchestra pit. The stage, the “lofty but striking platform of the imagination” (XVIII, 272) as Hazlitt dubbed it, rises out of the depths of the self; it recreates a world in which we are not present and to which we are not responsible. The empty orchestra pit marks an ontological boundary between the audience and the stage, between consciousness and dreaming, that we must transgress in order to enter the world of the illusion, the quasi-sacred space in which we lose our known selves to find our nobler, truer selves. The world on stage from which we are excluded encourages our absorption into it; the absolute boundary between stage and audience exists to invite us to cross it, leaving our critical faculties behind. The absence of such absolute boundaries in the Elizabethan theatre, however, includes us in the action without permitting our total absorption or abandonment of self-consciousness. The stage—also elevated in order that an actor be seen—extends horizontally into a profane auditorium rather than rising vertically from an unfathomable depth. The projecting platform gives the actor immediate and, in broad daylight, continuous access to his audience, some of whom filled the “pit,” and a few of whom sometimes even sat on stage. The maintenance of an intimate, intersubjective distance was crucial to a Renaissance audience, who, in Ovid's then proverbial phrase, went to the theatre to see and to be seen. Rather than forgetting its place in the theatre, the audience was frequently recognized and acknowledged by actors. Burbage's Hamlet did not “think aloud,” as Hazlitt
thought proper (V, 187), but declaimed like an orator, with a cultivated sense of how to sound his audience from the lowest note to the top of its compass. Emotions, of course, are involved, but as Stephen Orgel has written, “as in a debate, in the audience’s judgment lies half the action.” Our involvement, then, does not lead us to the edge of repose and dream, but, as Claudius’ address suggests, to a conflicted sense of our role in the action. Instead of losing ourselves in the exstasis of sympathetic identification, we remain possessed of our consciousness, or, in the synonymous Renaissance phrase used by Hamlet, caught by our “conscience.”

It is remarkable that except for “The Murder of Gonzago” Romantic critics do not discuss the abundant references in Hamlet to the conditions of its theatre. In a revision of the Romantic view, Leslie Fiedler has argued that Shakespeare makes the audience conscious of the realities of the stage as a defense of illusion. Qualifying Coleridge's point that by the contrast of its artifice “The Murder of Gonzago” enhances the illusion of reality in Hamlet, Fiedler argues that our disruptive realization that Hamlet too is only a play enables the illusion to be reconstituted at a “universal” level. “Is not the very piece we are seeing, the inner play suggests, precisely that play Hamlet has arranged before us—and are we not then a stage audience, beheld as well as beholding, at a play within some greater play, actors all in a universal drama, which inevitably defines all our plays as ‘plays within a play’?” (p. 88). Fiedler's argument finds additional sanction in the Renaissance commonplace of theatrum mundi, in which a less refined theological context is explicit. No doubt Jacques' aphorism “All the world's a stage” is always available to Shakespeare in Hamlet, but curiously neither it nor its theological context is ever activated. Except for the abrupt reappearance of the Ghost in the Closet scene, Hamlet does not avail itself of the suggestion that some hovering divinity watches us watch the play, as Thomas Kyd does in The Spanish Tragedy, where the Ghost and Revenge sit on stage from beginning to end. The experience of watching yourself be watched that creates self-consciousness is not expressed in the dramatic structure of Hamlet, but by the moment to moment interaction of audience and actor. Instead of attempting by theological or Romantic indirection to defend the theatre, Shakespeare goes out of his way to demystify the processes of theatrical hypnosis. The Players, who are real actors, not the lovable caricatures of A Midsummer Night's Dream, appear out of character; styles of acting are discussed, the whims of audiences and demands of performance are acknowledged, and other “plays” are presented. Fiedler's antitheatricalism, like that of the Romantic critics, seems to stem from his embarrassment inside the theatre coupled with a desire to defend the drama as a carrier of truth. But Hamlet is theatrical precisely insofar as it refuses to make its theatre serve a myth of “universal drama” or reduce the world (à la Jacques) to a stage. Instead Hamlet honors the integrity of the theatre, its truths and mysteries, as something alien, not ours, but which is still the object of our voracious appetites. Maddeningly, however, our appetites for theatre are turned against us. The frequent insistence that the play we watch is a fiction, like Hamlet's play for Claudius, forces us to reckon with our desire for dramatic fictions and our susceptibility to self-deception. If in the theatre we comfortably assume that we know the difference between a hawk and a handsaw, Hamlet makes it uncomfortably difficult for us to know or acknowledge what we have just seen on stage. The simultaneity of seeing and knowing that we take for granted everyday is made problematic in the theatre. Are the Player's tears real or acted? Why do they move Hamlet? What does Hamlet see in Claudius' face? What do we see Hamlet see? Is Hamlet or Claudius hoist on his own petard in the finale?

Before addressing these questions, I want to look more briefly at a few other moments of significant audience disjunction. In Fiedler's terms, the most defensive throwaway of the illusion occurs in the Cellarage scene (1.5) after Hamlet has vowed his revenge in a soliloquy of high tragic seriousness. Hamlet's jokes to the Ghost in the “cellarage” remind the audience of the physical event it has just witnessed: the closing trapdoor through which the actor passed when the Ghost vanished. Rather than suggesting that the world's a stage, however, the business of Horatio, Marcellus, and Hamlet shifting ground as the Ghost, hurrying beneath among the trestles or posts, stridently bids them “swear,” heightens the burlesque. But the burlesque of what? The jokes about the Ghost appeal to the audience's familiarity not only with the stage but also with the revenge plays to which they allude. The interlacing Latin phrase (hic et ubique), characteristic of Elizabethan University drama, has suggested to some editors that the earlier Hamlet is being remembered. Of course the earlier Hamlet has not survived, but ridicule of it has, such as Lodge's 1596 jeer about the Ghost “which cried so miserably at the
Theator, like an oyster wife, Hamlet, revenge.” It is probably safe to say that by 1601 revenge plays were considered hackneyed. Hamlet distracts us from our lack of conviction about such plays, and perhaps about his “poor part” (1.5.131), by stealing our laughter; at the same time he causes us to measure and qualify our involvement in this performance.

And yet, theatrically, Hamlet's gesture of self-awareness is oddly exhilarating. Like Claudius' “Do it England,” Hamlet's address to the Ghost in the cellarage grants us the somewhat giddy pleasure of being in two places at once. Often the play makes no pretense of place and uses our awareness of the stage and its traditional forms of deception to define our involvement in the fiction. Consider, for instance, the scene in which Polonius sends Reynaldo to Paris to make sure that Laertes is misbehaving only as a good son should. Polonius shows Reynaldo how to act in such a way that he will discover only what Polonius wants him to discover, no more, no less. “And there put on him / What forgeries you please, marry none so rank / As may dishonor him—take heed of that. … You must not put another scandal on him / That he is open to incontinency” (2.1.19-20; 29-30). Shakespeare is not concerned to show Laertes drinking or drabbing in Paris or to show a yokel from Elsinore ineptly putting forgeries on him. Instead we witness a burlesque of an oldtimer from University productions instructing an innocent in an outmoded, tendentious style of acting. Only later do we learn of Polonius' previous history as an actor, or does he demonstrate the literalization of gesture characteristic of this style in his ludicrously emphatic assurance to Claudius, “Take this from this” (2.2.156) if Hamlet is not mad for love of Ophelia. An audience would be likely to see through the acting style in which Polonius schools Reynaldo, just as Hamlet realizes at the end of the preceding scene that any conspicuously emphatic gesture (“with arms encumbered thus, nor with this headshake, or by pronouncing some doubtful phrase” [1.5.175]) would give away the pretense of his “antic disposition.” Later we again associate Hamlet with Polonius when Hamlet knowingly instructs actors in a superior style of acting that will enable them to elicit from the audience the response he wants to get. If we feel comfortably contemptuous of Polonius' self-deceiving plan to “take this carp of truth” with a “bait of falsehood,” then, as I will suggest, less comfortable suspicions might attend our agreement with Hamlet that he has “caught the conscience of the King.”

The crucial test for the efficacy of acting occurs in Hamlet's account of how he regained the native hue of his resolution (5.2). Shakespeare does not show us Hamlet acting decisively on the ship to England, but instead relies on a theatrical demonstration. The stage is placeless, without suggestion of locale until Hamlet is ready for the duel in the “hall” (5.2.174). No longer in the inky cloak of mourning or in the disarray of antic disposition, Hamlet is perhaps still scarfed in the “sea-gown” (5.2.13), the outward sign of his change. His interruptions of syntactical units, his digressive elaborations, and his demands on Horatio's attention and ours (in a manner similar to that of Prospero's retrospective tale to Miranda in The Tempest) make his account sound like self-justification. Hamlet is now performing; at one point he invokes a theatrical metaphor (“Or I could make a prologue to my brains / They had begun to play”) to describe the pace of the action. His re-enactment of the chaotic events aboard ship makes them now feel coherent, even providential. Unlike the “rash” (3.4.28, 32) murder of Polonius, Hamlet can justify the “rashness” (5.2.7) of sending Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to their deaths. He removes them from his “conscience” (5.2.58) and rhetorically works himself up to avenge his father upon Claudius (5.2.68). And yet, his performance betrays a disturbing contradiction. Mysteriously something has happened on the way to England; Hamlet has learned to let things take their course, to “let be.” No longer will he exercise his control over events; he will stop acting. But in order to show us what has happened, Hamlet must act. His assertions of change, coming so perilously close to the over-explicitness of a Polonius, raise the possibility that Hamlet now acts in the hope that something will happen, something will change. We may be convinced by his performance or we may resist, as the play has taught us, being played upon by an actor. In either case, what has happened to Hamlet has not happened to us; we become aware of our distance from Hamlet and of our difference.

My point is not that Hamlet attempts to trick us at a crucial point in the plot, but that Shakespeare carefully makes us aware of the ambiguities that attend our allegiance to Hamlet. Almost every action in Hamlet is
accompanied by an acknowledgement of the artifices of the stage or of the performing presence of the actor from whom action originates. By making us aware of the theatre within the theatre, the play creates a distance between the audience and its hero that does not abrogate our sympathy, but makes it ours to give, our responsibility once given.

II

Hamlet makes us self-conscious as an audience and often makes us uneasy about the ease with which we acquiesce in Hamlet's view of himself. Our tendency, like Hamlet, to see only what we want to see, is evident in the way the principal action of the play unfolds. As an act of restitution, revenge is a form of mourning; it must be appropriate not to what the world is, but to what it has become. Throughout the first act the heroic comparisons and religiously suggestive language make the audience feel in the death of old Hamlet the loss of a world in which one's words and actions held conviction. In the theatre of the Players, Hamlet finds the conviction he lacks and the possibility of reclaiming a world of action lost to him outside the theatre. The theatre becomes the definitional structure of action in Hamlet, but frequently it threatens to undermine the action of the drama, and even the possibility of action. The Players arouse Hamlet's impulses for the heroic and forbidden, for actions which it turns out, however, can be acted out only in the theatre. An actor conveys his intimacy with the human feelings of the audience, promises in his performance to quell our intimations of unreality, but reserves for himself and the stage sole rights to their expression. The theatre thus turns against Hamlet: on the one hand, it suggests that actions can only be acted (with pretense, for an audience) and on the other, that acting can never be more than gesture, cannot attain the “name of action” (3.1.88).

The long-standing difficulties of relating the Player's recitation of Aeneas' tale to Dido, written in an overly theatrical style of acting and verse, to the action of Hamlet suggests something of this antagonism between acting and action. In the best essay on the connection of the Player's speech with Hamlet, Harry Levin argues that Hamlet is to be identified with Aeneas, old Hamlet with Priam, Fortinbras with Pyrrhus, and Gertrude with Hecuba.11 The analogy is apt up to a point: the sight of Priam's slaughter arouses Hamlet, like Aeneas, from inaction, but their subsequent actions couldn't be more different. In the Aeneid the sight of the slain Priam calls up the image of Aeneas' father (cari genitoris imago, [2.560]) and recalls him to his familial and historic duties. When a few lines later Aeneas sees Helen, he learns that he must forgo the revenge of Priam and Troy. He never absolutely overcomes his impulses to vindicate and reside in the past, but even in the militarism of the later books where we might expect such impulses to be aired, they are not invested with the compelling inwardness we find in his violent fantasy of killing Helen. In Aeneas' tale to Dido, the Homeric language and ethos of revenge and martial heroism are employed with more immediacy than anywhere else in the Aeneid; but like its hero, after paying tribute to its poetic past, the poem is able to get past it. In Hamlet, however, the Player's speech recalls Hamlet to his revenge and compels him to dwell in the past. Recounting the past, obeying the Ghost's injunction to “remember,” leaves Hamlet regressively attached to the past, condemned tragically to repeat it.

The difficulties of the Player's speech increase when we consider the problem of its performance—the toll re-enacting the past takes on an actor and the ways an actor makes his presence felt in his performance. As Levin has shown, the speech carefully establishes our literary and temporal distance from its subject: we are witness to a re-enactment of a witness' account of the murder. At the same time, however, as we hear a voice from that lost world, the past seems about to emerge again into our presence. The speech begins (2.2.460) narratively in the past tense (“did the night resemble”) and subordinates Pyrrhus' presence (“Hyrcanian,” “rugged,” “sable,” “black”) to an explanation of his arrival (“When he lay couched in the ominous horse”). Then suddenly Pyrrhus emerges in the present tense with an emphatic repetition of “now.” The locution “Head to foot” describes someone in full dress for combat, as it did in Horatio's description of the Ghost to Hamlet (1.2.200), where it assures him and us that he has not succumbed to “fantasy” (1.1.23). Pyrrhus' presence, like the Ghost's, seems as undeniable as an actor's body (“head to foot”) on stage. As he recites the description of Pyrrhus, Hamlet might call attention to his own body in a gesture of immediacy while the
inverted syntax emphasizes the urgently unfolding action (“old grandsire Priam seeks”). The opening
description is an example of what in Renaissance rhetoric would have been called enargeia, or to use the term
which also had currency as an ideal of acting, “liveliness”: we feel we are in the presence of Pyrrhus and an
urgent action rather than in the presence of Aeneas removed in Carthage.

Throughout, however, the liveliness and conviction of the Player's speech depend more on the physical
presence of the actor than on his bombastic rhetoric. In the soliloquy afterwards, Hamlet comments not on the
magnitude of Hecuba's grief, but on the tears, paled complexion, and distracted aspect of the Player. Hamlet
realizes that what has happened happened to an actor, not just to the character “Hecuba.” Hamlet's complaint
“What's Hecuba to him or he to Hecuba / That he should weep for her?” is a quite apt allusion to the art of the
actor who not only brings feeling to his role (“he to Hecuba”) but whose own feelings are strengthened and
developed by his role (“Hecuba to him”). To the extent that an actor internalizes his role, his performance may
have resonances for him that cannot be expressed explicitly, that, in Hamlet's words, “pass show.” Since
Hamlet does not mention Pyrrhus in his soliloquy, however, critics have generally ignored the disturbing
implications that playing Pyrrhus might have for Hamlet and not for the Player. Borrowing Coleridge's terms,
Levin goes so far as to argue that the speech is not concerned with Pyrrhus' “epic” action, but with Hecuba's
“lyric” lament (p. 144), despite the fact that the former is substantially longer and theatrically and
psychologically more complex. Moreover, although the narrative frame virtually disappears, as I have
suggested, from the opening description, Levin identifies Hamlet with Aeneas, and Pyrrhus as a vividly
depicted, but “unfeeling” (p. 150) fiend. Pyrrhus may be both unfeeling and a fiend, but the rhapsode, who in
the opening description is Hamlet, does feel.

What is Hamlet to Pyrrhus or Pyrrhus to Hamlet? The Player's speech invites this connection and its denial in
a number of ways. As avenging sons, they are opposites. Aeneas' description from “Head to foot” of “hellish
Pyrrhus” echoes Ophelia's portrait from “head” to “ankle” (2.1.79) of Hamlet, so “piteous in purport. / As if he
had been loosed out of hell / To speak of horrors.” Pyrrhus' relentless pursuit of his revenge appears to
rebuke Hamlet's inactivity and disarray—a rebuke that the Ghost (who according to one tradition doubled as
the First Player) would be justified in making, as he subsequently does in the Closet scene. Later in the play it
becomes evident that Pyrrhus has become a model revenger for Hamlet. Before “The Murder of Gonzago,”
there is an undercurrent of veiled references to Pyrrhus (e.g., 3.2.86, 185-87), and afterwards when Hamlet
looks upon himself as a revenger who could “drink hot blood / And do such bitter business as the day / Would
quake to look on” (3.2.398-400), he sounds as if he would out-Pyrrhus Pyrrhus, who is “tricked / With blood
of fathers, mothers, daughters, sons, / Baked and impasted with the parching streets, / That lend a tyrannous
and damned light to their lord's murder” (2.2.469). And in the Prayer scene, where Hamlet comes close to
becoming a caricature of a revenger, his posture—pausing over Claudius with an extended sword—visually
reminds the audience of Pyrrhus' long pause standing over the half-slain Priam. If Pyrrhus suggests a model of
the avenging son to Hamlet, Pyrrhus' murder of old Priam also makes him the object of Hamlet's revenge.
Such logic leads to suicide.

The description of Priam's murder casts Hamlet in exactly such a dark, contradictory role. At the moment
Pyrrhus seeks Priam, Hamlet relinquishes the stage to the Player. The Player continues in the present tense
until Pyrrhus is about to murder Priam, when suddenly the speech recoils and stops. Where Virgil, Marlowe,
and the First Quarto end their accounts of Priam's murder, the Second Quarto and Folios delay. Marlowe's
“So, leaning on his sword he stood stone still,” which commentators have associated with the Player's “So, as
a painted tyrant, Pyrrhus stood,” comes as a moment of repose after, not before, the murder. Moreover,
Shakespeare eliminates Virgil's description of Hecuba's intervention and the direct exchanges between Priam
and Pyrrhus. With highly simplified dramaturgy, the Player presents only what is directly pertinent to a single,
culminating action. In the silence of Pyrrhus and Priam, Shakespeare creates a visual tableau of the murder
extended over eighteen lines of verse that places a premium on the interaction of actor and audience. “For lo,
his sword, / Which was declining on the milky head / Of reverend Priam, seem'd i' th' air to stick. / So, like a
painted tyrant Pyrrhus stood.” As the natural flow of action is arrested, we become intensely aware both of the
actor's presence, his body, his gestures, and of his conflict with his role. For the first time the Player uses overtly psychological diction: “Pyrrhus stood, / And like a neutral to his will and matter / Did nothing.” The Player's rhetoric and appearance as a visual emblem of Hamlet's delay cause us to divide our attention between Hamlet and the Player. We watch an actor inhibited by the spectacle of his action, as Hamlet later is in the Prayer scene, and we watch Hamlet, in effect, watch himself about to perform the murder he must revenge. The momentary superimposition of Hamlet and Pyrrhus creates an uncomfortable distortion of the action which we are then made to feel is literally unspeakable. “But as we often see against some storm, / A silence in the heavens, the rack stand still / The bold winds speechless, and the orb below / As hush as death. …” The glimpse we have of Hamlet's dilemma, in short, remains unexpressed and calls for interpretation.

Instead of complicating Hamlet's sense of revenge, however, the Player's performance revives his pursuit of it. When in the soliloquy Hamlet complains that he can “say nothing” (2.2.580), he refocuses the meaning of the Player's action (who momentarily “did nothing”) without acknowledging that any darkening distortion had occurred. Hamlet's failure to register such distortions is a recurring pattern in a play that frequently loses focus and changes direction. When Hamlet next enters (in 3.1), for example, an audience expects him to be in pursuit of his revenge; instead, surprisingly and inexplicably, he delivers the “To be or not to be” soliloquy. We quickly realize that his subsequent attack on Ophelia is not merely “antic disposition”; Hamlet seems truly mad for love of Ophelia, overturning our confidence throughout Act 2 that Polonius was a fool to think so. After losing control with Ophelia, Hamlet returns calmed in the next scene to advise the Players that an actor should deliver his lines calmly, should not “o'erstep the modesty of nature” (3.2.20). Hamlet acknowledges nothing of his recent outburst, and the play proceeds, as it does with great tension after the death of Polonius, as if nothing had happened, as if no action could or does have consequences. Again, in “The Murder of Gonzago,” Hamlet fails to register the fact that the Players' text involves a significant distortion. When just before the climactic murder Hamlet introduces Lucianus as “nephew to the King” (3.2.250), the discomfort we felt in the Player's speech is recalled and confirmed. Again our attention is drawn to Hamlet, the King's nephew, as it was when Pyrrhus paused before murdering Priam, and our willingness to ignore the evidence and agree with Hamlet's interpretation of the play is put to the test.

It appears to Hamlet that the King's conscience is caught when he abruptly rises and calls for light. Since “nephew to the King” more immediately identifies Hamlet than Claudius, however, other interpretations of his departure are quite feasible. The court audience, for example, interprets the play as a threat to Claudius' life, an interpretation it continues to hold after the final duel (5.2.324), and one which Claudius encourages in his conference with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in the next scene (3.3). Although the play must seem to Claudius a paranoid nightmare in which murder turns out somehow to have a tongue, his interruption of the play before he is clearly implicated as the “murderer” who “gets the love of Gonzago's wife” (3.2.270) preserves the ambiguity that Lucianus is to be identified with Hamlet. Hamlet himself confirms the precision of Claudius' timing when he asks Horatio about Claudius' appearance “upon the talk of poisoning” (3.2.296). If we can entertain the possibility that Claudius remained in control, then his outburst is perhaps not the helpless confession of guilt Hamlet assumes it to be, but a shrewdly improvised management of his audience's response. Although Hamlet wants and later confidently believes this play to convict Claudius of old Hamlet's murder, his introduction of Lucianus creates a troubling distortion. The change of perspective from a play about the murder of an innocent old King to one about a nephew's revenge seems to be a gesture of Hamlet's power to terrorize Claudius, and, coming as it does just before old Gonzago's murder, is perhaps a deeply irrational fantasy of his power to save old Hamlet by killing Claudius. For obscure reasons, which I will come to shortly, Hamlet wants to make Hamlet and “The Murder of Gonzago” into the same play. Their superimposition, however, distorts more than it clarifies, and again casts Hamlet in a contradictory role, leaving us without any single adequate account of what we have seen.

Audiences, however, have so tended to share Hamlet's conviction that he has caught Claudius' conscience that until the start of the 20th century the Prayer scene, in which Claudius unambiguously confesses his guilt, was customarily cut from productions. This was doubtless designed primarily to spare the audience the distress
of seeing Hamlet in a bad light, but it also assumes that Claudius' guilt is proved by “The Murder of Gonzago.” My point here is not that Claudius may be innocent, but that we should recognize that our agreement with Hamlet is not a response to a proven fact. After “The Murder of Gonzago,” however, Hamlet virtually paralyses our ability or inclination to acknowledge what we have seen and heard. In celebration of his success, Hamlet bursts into the doggerel of a clown. Horatio seems about to be the voice of reason to Hamlet's triumphal glee, but every apparent hesitation he voices (“half a share”; “you might have rhymed”) only fuels Hamlet's wit. When finally Hamlet remembers his plan to check his interpretation with Horatio, Horatio assents (“I did not him well” [3.2.296]) without saying what he saw—and Hamlet, of course, does not stop to ask. Hamlet is so sure that he has discovered Claudius' guilt that it would be futile to attempt to show him that he cannot be so certain in presuming to know the meaning of another's behavior. Still, the self-deception of such presumption is exactly his point when in an elaborately extended conceit he berates Rosencrantz and Guildenstern for trying to “pluck the heart out of my mystery.” “Call me what instrument you will, though you can fret me, you cannot play upon me” (3.2.379-80). Again we might wish to remind Hamlet that he has tented Claudius to the quick, but no gesture of self-awareness is forthcoming on his part.

When Hamlet mimics Polonius' willingness to confirm his every whim, Shakespeare again goes out of his way to suggest the inconclusiveness of Hamlet's consultation with Horatio. The “cloud,” which assumes the shape its beholder gives it (a camel, weasel, whale, [3.2.385 ff]), recalls the ambiguity we found in “The Murder of Gonzago.” Hamlet does not acknowledge the self-fulfilling procedure of confirmation that he mimics in Polonius as his own, but expects his audience to share his masterful contempt for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and Polonius. Characteristically, Hamlet behaves as if the distorting introduction of Lucianus had not occurred; but by repeatedly showing us Hamlet's clownish and boastful exaggerations, the play refuses to refocus completely. Like the clowns whose banter he would banish from the theatre, Hamlet appears to play more to his audience than to the “necessary question of the play” (3.2.45).

In general Hamlet denies our potentially different perspectives by having us adopt his; he resists our analysis of him by exhaustively and sometimes satirically analyzing himself. Hamlet does not have to relinquish the fictions of self, as Lear must, but displays them confidently in a great “variety” (to use Dr. Johnson's word) of forms. We always enjoy the intelligence of Hamlet's performance, his ability to stay one step ahead of us, to seem to know us better than we know ourselves. Hamlet invites us to admire him for his anxieties by making them entertaining. “To be or not to be” does not become our question; we appreciate his quickness of mind as he moves through moment to moment puzzles of logic and traps of metaphor, and we are pleased without really having to worry about what he says. Hamlet does not cause us the pain that Lear does, but tempts us to regard our intellectual pleasure with a seriousness that borders on self-deception. So much inwardness exhibited and acted on stage, however, may lead us to feel that intelligence and style are not enough, that Hamlet tells us certain things to avoid telling us others. Only the First Gravedigger knows the limits of intelligence, and his appearance, although late and short-lived, confirms our feeling that Hamlet's delight in the nuances of his various metaphors and logics can be mimicked in the way that Hamlet mimics almost everyone else in the play. In other Shakespearean tragedies, the hero's perspective is often questioned by what Maynard Mack calls an “opposing voice”—tragic sensibility is established from a skeptical, ironical distance. Hamlet, however, has no Enobarbus or Kent or Fool who articulates an independent perspective and who ultimately remains loyal to his master. Horatio is loyal, but essentially the silent stoic. Lear and Cleopatra are heroic partly because of their distance; they do not spend themselves on us. Our intimacy with Hamlet does not pluck out his mystery, but we may begin to feel that he wants too much to be seen if not heroically, then at least as tragically unheroical. In Hamlet, the role of “opposing voice” is ours.

III

The strain of Hamlet's acting is especially evident whenever he thinks of revenge. “Hold, hold, my heart, / And you, my sinews, grow not instant old, / But bear me stiffly up” (1.5.93-95). Ready for his revenge after “The Murder of Gonzago,” Hamlet bears himself stiffly until he remembers his visit to his mother: “Now could I drink hot blood / And do such bitter business as the day / Would quake to look on. Soft, now to my
mother” (3.2.398 ff.). When he next stumbles upon Claudius at prayer with knees as “soft as sinews of a newborn babe” (3.3.71), Hamlet's taut posture and outstretched sword signal his inability to act, as does his oddly rigid language of revenge when he leaves for England (4.4.65). On each occasion, as we watch the actor tense his body in an assertion of strength and virility, we find Hamlet impotent and immobilized by anger. Hamlet's assertions of revenge, that is, always appear at odds with themselves. The deep contradictions of revenge are evident to the audience in the dramatic presentations of old Hamlet's murder. Hamlet's ambiguous identification with Pyrrhus and then with Lucianus suggests that he must repeat in a different form the act he would revenge. Hamlet too must kill a King, an act that has patricidal associations even when the King is Claudius. More importantly, Hamlet's identification with these aggressors occurs in the first instance when the Player's rhetoric sympathetically forestalls the murder, and in the second when Hamlet would prevent it by threatening Claudius. Hamlet's thoughts of revenge occur at moments at which he might magically “undo” old Hamlet's murder. In psychoanalytic thought, fantasies of “undoing” are often indicated by compulsive patterns of repetition. “What has not happened in such a way as would have accorded with one's desire,” Freud writes, “is made through its repetition in some other way, not to have happened at all—to which are superadded all the various motives which may exist for lingering upon these repetitions.” However heroically conceived, the act of revenge becomes for Hamlet more a gesture than an action, a gesture which cannot attain the completion of action and which, as the murder of Polonius suggests, condemns the revenger to futile repetition of the past.

No one in the play ever conceives of revenge as repetitive action, but we experience patterns of repetition in the play's structure, language, and performance. In the first act, the Ghost appears and reappears in silence, and then speaks to tell Hamlet the story of his murder. In the third act, the Ghost's tale is performed first without and then with words; and in the last act, after Hamlet rests in silence, Horatio promises to retell the story we have just witnessed. Some actions need to be performed twice to attain the name of action. Fortinbras enters Denmark first as its enemy, then as its King; Polonius dies first as Caesar and then as himself; Hamlet re-enacts for us the events aboard the ship to England. The impulse to go back and dwell over actions is felt in the difficulties of leave-taking. Anxious to finish his tale, the Ghost (1.5.60) continues for thirty lines, bids Hamlet “adieu” three times, and then lingers to repeat his command to “swear”; Hamlet ends the scene by twice saying “let us together” to Marcellus and Horatio. Similarly Polonius scolds Laertes for staying too long (1.3.55) and then commands his son with a list of precepts. Hamlet bids Ophelia “farewell” three times in the Nunnery scene and then exits only with the refrain. “To a nunnery, go”; he bids Gertrude “goodnight” five times in the Closet scene; and tells Horatio he is dead at least three times before his last exit from the play. Hamlet habitually repeats his own words for emphasis, and in general actors, apparently wanting to make the most out of their lines, tended to repeat words and phrases not “set down” (3.2.41) in the text, as the significant increase of such repetitions in the First Folio, usually thought to be based on a promptbook, indicates. Our impression throughout the play is that characters remain attached to what they must relinquish; that all action necessitates repetition to gain focus and definition.

Repetitive action is an important feature of the public theatre. The hectic pace of the Elizabethan repertory system, in which an actor might have to perform forty different roles in a season, must have made it difficult for actors to trust their performances to have innerness and conviction, and would have encouraged them to rely heavily on external gesture to convey intense feeling. After the Player's re-enactment of the conventional stage roles of revenger and wailing woman, Hamlet demonstrates, with the virtuosity of the professional role-player that he is, his facility in repertory as a “John-a-dreams,” a coward challenged as a villain, and a revenger. Hamlet's use of well-worn theatrical pranks to exhibit his suffering and compel us with his self-rebuke makes his performance exhilarating. As he works himself up into the role of a revenger, however, Hamlet despairs of theatrical routine. “Bloody, bawdy villain! / Remorseless, treacherous, lecherous, kindless villain! / O vengeance! / Why, what an ass am I!” (2.2.591 ff.). The heavily alliterative list of adjectives and the short climactic “O vengeance” punctuating the outburst require the actor to commit the original sin of the Stanislavski method: theatrical acting. The consciousness of acting blocks Hamlet's concentration within his role; ranting like a conventional stage revenger, his performance loses focus. Exasperated that by acting his
passion, it has not gained conviction, Hamlet arranges a play in which he will not have to act and to which he can be a spectator vicariously reliving and recounting his motives for revenge.

Hamlet's performance suggests the uncertainty that undermines his successive attempts to demonstrate his original assertion that he has that “within which passeth show.” Here the assertion takes the form of a question: “What would he [the Player] do / Had he the motive and cue for passion / That I have?” (2.2.570 ff.). In the course of the soliloquy, however, Hamlet discovers that his own unfathomable singularity is, or appears to be, only a role, which as an actor he cannot fully settle into. Perhaps Hamlet is as unaware of what's within him as we are, but Hamlet himself never relinquishes the self-critical voice of the soliloquies with its privileged assumption that it does not come from the same place as the Hamlet it rebukes and accuses. But where, then, does it come from? Perhaps Hamlet discovers in the agonies of self-disavowal that in asserting his interiority to us, he is playing yet another role, which in the infinite regress of his self-reflection he in turn will have to disavow. Whether there is a self behind his various roles or a desperate intimation of emptiness, Hamlet finds that self-reflection is itself an act of theatre. Taking the self as an object of reflection becomes for Hamlet the problematic act of role-taking. Unable to establish his identity alone (his condition throughout), Hamlet must seek confirmation of the self in his audience. The most self-reflective of heroes, and the most protective of his special integrity, Hamlet finally must see himself as we see him.

Hamlet's self-interruption (“Why, what an ass am I!”) reminds us how crucially the Elizabethan convention by which the actor remains aware of his audience could affect performance. Direct address to the audience does not destroy the illusion; rather it is in Hamlet's character to enlist our support and seek our admiration, to make us feel what he feels. He may wish to “make mad the guilty and appal the free” (2.2.574), but he must measure in his performance our conviction and affirmation. When Hamlet at last does complete his revenge, he suits his words to his action. “Here thou incestuous, murd'rous, damned Dane” (5.2.326). The rhetorical economy—copious and rhythmic without the excesses of “Bloody, bawdy villain …”—makes his action feel convincing and satisfying. We seem to have reached the promised end. In Michael Goldman's words, our appetite for “significant action” is satisfied, and we find in these last few minutes a “spacious ending, a great clarifying release.” But what exactly does the ending clarify and how valuable is our release? When Hamlet makes Claudius drink the poison, he appears to be more the avenger of his mother's death than of his father's. In fact, Hamlet poisons Claudius twice: once with the sword that killed him, and then again with the potion that killed Gertrude. We are left to wonder how Hamlet would have actively negotiated his father's revenge, and more importantly we are faced with the last in a series of attempts in the play to claim an event filled with ambiguities as an unambiguous success. The concern for justifying Hamlet's actions shown in the last two hundred lines of the play indicates how uncertain and unsatisfied we, in fact, may be.

We should begin with Hamlet's own justification of his actions to Laertes. It is hard not to wish, like Dr. Johnson, that Hamlet had made some other defense. Instead of acknowledging his role in Polonius' death and Ophelia's madness, Hamlet denies that “Hamlet” (5.2.277 ff.) wronged him. “Was it Hamlet wronged Laertes? Never Hamlet.” As evasive in court rhetoric as he was earlier in antic disposition (in 4.3), Hamlet attempts to turn even his apology into a personal triumph—here the triumph over his “madness,” which he has schooled us to see as merely acted. Hamlet's failure to acknowledge either our logical hesitations—does “madness” commit murder?—or the possibility of personal defeat—doesn't the “madness” belong to “Hamlet”?—reconfirms the pattern we noted in Act 3, in which Hamlet ignores any ambiguities that would detract from his position or pretends they have not occurred. The person “Hamlet” becomes a fiction whose identity Hamlet can establish only by reiterating his name and whose reality he expects us to affirm. “Sir, in this audience / Let my disclaiming … / Free me” (5.2.241). The necessity of gaining our support increases as Hamlet's death approaches. After killing Claudius, Hamlet does not end with a sense of heroic completion, but with one final wish for an “audience” (5.2.336) to whom in one last histrionic gesture (“O, I could tell you—”) he might justify his performance in the play. The action of revenge neither frees Hamlet from the necessity to act nor does it exhaust his desire to act. Unlike Saxo's Amleth, however, Hamlet does not have time to make a lengthy public defense, but he makes clear his thirst for self-justification by twice asking
Horatio to tell his “story.”

Hamlet ends with yet another coup de théâtre with Hamlet dying in his ideal role as a frustrated actor and a misunderstood Prince. Even in his death, Hamlet the actor and Hamlet the Prince fail to merge in an affirmation of his heroic identity. Hamlet ends with a frustrated desire to reclaim his audience, like Richard II who wants his “lamentable tale” (5.1.140) to make its hearers weep. But by granting Hamlet's wish to have his story told, Shakespeare exposes the bad conscience in the desire to find pardon in telling stories that we find in a less elaborate form at the end of Romeo and Juliet, where the survivors leave the stage to tell the “story” of the tragic lovers. An audience's experience after Hamlet's death is of repeatedly frustrated attempts to confer value on the tragic spectacle it witnesses. After Horatio bids a gentle farewell to his Prince, Fortinbras, another successfully vindicated son, enters with the English ambassadors. Horatio asks Fortinbras what he “would see,” and then shows him, with a felt but quite conventional tag describing the effect of tragic drama on its audience, a spectacle of “woe and wonder” (5.2.364). All seems finished, and we have no further questions until the English ambassador steps forward to report the news that Hamlet knew he would not “live to hear” (5.2.355)—that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead. Not only is Hamlet denied the satisfaction of learning of the completion of his revenge—the one successfully plotted action in the last two acts—but it can no longer justify him in the way he would have wanted. Letting Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, in Horatio's phrase, “go to’t” (5.2.56) has a satisfying ring and was possibly just, but in the context now of his highminded praise, hardly noble and worthy of “wonder.” The ambassador's “Where should we have our thanks?” reopens the question of the responsibility for action that undermined Hamlet's apology to Laertes. Although Horatio denies that Claudius sent the order, he also ignores what Hamlet had spent the first part of the last scene convincing us was so—that “Hamlet” had decisively ordered their deaths. Somewhat like Horatio, we are left to reflect on how events invested with such powerful conviction outlive and diminish their actors.

At the end of Hamlet everything remains to be accounted for, to be done or told again. “So shall you hear,” Horatio begins, sounding like a “truly” concise prologue to a dramatic production of the events we have witnessed. Fortinbras now calls the “noblest to the audience”—the third hint in the last two hundred lines of our importance—and, honoring Horatio's suggestion that the bodies “high on a stage be placed to view” (5.2.380), he orders the soldier's music sounded, for Hamlet was “likely, had he been put on. / To have proved most royal” (5.2.398-400). Fortinbras' rearrangement of the bloody carnage of bodies strewn on stage into an orderly funeral procession accommodates our desire to admire Hamlet, but the evident strain of the soldierly comparison (“like a soldier … had he been”) and the repeated reference to the “stage” call us back to the play we have just seen “put on.” We feel in Fortinbras' summation even more overtly the tension embedded in Horatio's earlier question between what we “would see” and what we do see. Horatio and Fortinbras tempt an audience not certain how to think about its hero with endings that either say too little or say too much. Despite the formal suggestions of completion and closure, Hamlet does not provide its audience with cathartic release (“woe and wonder”) or with the satisfactions of playing out once and for all the forces that set it into motion. Hamlet activates our instincts for revenge, but does not permit us to value their gratification. Just as Hamlet disowns the actions that are his, we may be tempted to disown the hero that is ours. Our identification with Hamlet throughout the play sanctions the frustrated wish we share with him to re-experience the world as heroically vindicated or as tragically victimized, while the endings of Hamlet make explicit the fictions on which such an identification must be based. Instead of purging us of our pretenses, Hamlet demonstrates how eager we may be to believe our stories about ourselves.

Perhaps even a Brecht would have found it difficult to maintain in the theatre the ideal of self-consciousness and judgment that Shakespeare apparently expected of the “audience” of Hamlet. The long history of audience identification with Hamlet, moreover, has obscured the importance of Shakespeare's attempts to involve the audience in fictions through self-consciousness rather than at its expense. Particularly at this point in his career, Shakespeare tested the limits of his dramaturgy to create a distance, both aesthetic and ethical, from which the audience could be made conscious as an audience of its affirmations. The prologues to Henry V and the central addresses to the crowd (often called the “audience”) in Julius Caesar explore the willingness of
audiences to give themselves over to self-validating fictions.\textsuperscript{17} In \textit{Hamlet} the explicit discussion of theatrical fashions might well make the audience reconsider its own theatrical appetites. Hamlet, for instance, praises the “play” from which the Player's speech is excerpted because as heroic drama it did not pander to its audience; and as a result, it closed when it opened. As an instance of 16th century culture's most popular dramatic form, however, \textit{Hamlet} was an almost certain success even before it opened—if Shakespeare could infuse his revision of the earlier \textit{Hamlet} with new conviction. In William Empson's words, Shakespeare needed to satisfy an audience that “demanded a Revenge play, and then would laugh when it was provided.”\textsuperscript{18}

One way of dealing with the problem would be to have Hamlet in the soliloquies talk the audience into taking the play seriously, to let much depend, as it had in \textit{Henry V} and \textit{Julius Caesar}, on the ability of a single actor to dazzle and manipulate our responses to the action. Because we know the plot and ethos of \textit{Hamlet} all too well beforehand, the actor's self-reflexiveness, as well as the play's, gives the fiction the immediacy of a theatrical event.

The event is the re-enactment of an old play revised for the occasion. Once the play is underway, Horatio reminds the regular clientele of another play it had recently seen when he refers to the time “ere the mighty Julius fell” (1.1.115). In the third act, Polonius tells us that he played Caesar and again dies ominously in the middle of the play. And finally in the graveyard, when in an abrupt shift to ceremonial verse, Hamlet announces that Caesar is dead, \textit{Hamlet} completes its oblique gesture to the re-enactment of Caesar's murder prophesied by Cassius and Brutus (3.1.144 ff.). These allusions contribute to the pervasive pattern of repetition in \textit{Hamlet} that might well produce in the audience something like the unsettling security of \textit{déjà vu}.

The staging of the past in \textit{Hamlet} and the restaging of the earlier \textit{Hamlet} suggest that the past of the audience has become its pastime, its entertainment. But Shakespeare does not simply pander to his audience, confirm our habits of response, or sell us a self-validating account of our vindication and victimization in a treacherous world. By frequently acknowledging the conditions that produce dramatic entertainments, Shakespeare holds us responsible for our theatrical appetites. In \textit{Hamlet} we see what we came to the theatre to see; our wishes, however, are not only fulfilled but they are also criticized. As we enjoy the pleasures of re-experiencing our deepest desires vicariously, Shakespeare unmasks the fictions of our subjectivity and enables us to see ourselves, for the shock of a moment, from the outside; we see ourselves both as the subject of the play's outcome and as the object of its most searching questions.

Notes

1. My text is the Signet \textit{Hamlet}, ed. Edward Hubler (New York, 1963). References to other Shakespeare plays are also to the Signet editions. I owe a general debt to the writings of Stanley Cavell; to Paul Alpers, Jonas Barish, and Arnold Stein for timely suggestions; to Janet Adelman, Stephen Booth, and Susan Harris for their copious criticisms; and to Stephen Orgel for whom and with whom this essay was conceived and completed.
10. We can only speculate about whether Polonius' manner would have been immediately identified as a University style of acting. See Alan Downer, “Prologomenon to a Study of Elizabethan Acting,”
Critics have often taken Claudius' aside at 3.1.50-54 as a confession of his guilt for the murder of old Hamlet, but the metaphor of the “harlot's cheek” is more suggestive of the sexual crime of incest than of fratricide. Like Gertrude's aside at 4.5.17-20, which has not convinced most critics of her part in or knowledge of the murder, Claudius' confession in 3.1 remains perplexingly opaque and open to questions.


A psychoanalytic account of Hamlet's energy for acting might be pursued, as Susan Harris has suggested to me, through the analogous relation of mothers and sons and audiences and actors. Hamlet knows his mother primarily as a wife, her “husband's brother's wife” (3.4.16), a woman he cannot possess sexually, and his violently aggressive erotic impulses toward her are usually displaced into his energy for acting and exhibition. “Like a whore, [I] unpack my heart with words” (2.2.597) describes his relation to his audience primarily, but also his behavior toward Gertrude in the Closet scene. “Like a whore” expresses both his shame before his audience and an uncannily precise identification with his mother. Rebut of actors has traditionally taken an anti-feminist form (see Jonas Barish, “Exhibitionism and the Antitheatrical Prejudice,” ELH, 36 (1969), but Hamlet's identification runs deeper. An actor displaying his body to the gaze of his audience shares the fate of women in our culture whose entire bodies are eroticized in the name of “feminine beauty” (see Otto Fenichel, “On Acting,” Psychoanalytic Quarterly, 15, No. 2 [1946], 145). Hamlet's making himself into his own erotic object suggests in psychoanalytic terms oral-narcissistic confusions: mothers and audiences present a similar dilemma to sons and actors, who face the problem of establishing separate identities and at the same time of desiring to deny or incorporate the other. We can contrast Hamlet's theatricality with Macbeth's: unlike Hamlet, Macbeth knows his wife as a mother (their relationship is closer to that of Coriolanus and Volumnia), which suggests a quite different set of erotic displacements, and accordingly his brooding, genuinely introspective soliloquies lack Hamlet's exhibitionism. An adequate psychoanalytic treatment of acting is yet to be written.

Harold Jenkins in “Playhouse Interpolations in the Folio Hamlet,” Studies in Bibliography, 13 (1960), 31-49 points out numerous instances of verbal repetition in the Folios not found in either Quarto. Jenkins argues that since the “additions in F [made by actors] distort or weaken the effect of Q,” they should be “eliminated from future editions” (43). Although Jenkins' argument is convincing on narrow textual grounds, I think he underestimates the elusiveness and precariousness of the play's tragic “effect” and the value of the responses actors actually have to a text in deciding that effect.

Shakespeare and the Energies of Drama (Princeton, 1972), p. 88. Although my conclusions are frequently opposed to Professor Goldman's, I have learned much from his acute discussion of “stop-actions” in the play. Equally important is Robert Hapgood's “Hamlet Nearly Absurd,” Tulane Drama Review 9 (1965), 132-45, in which he argues that we are released from the structure of repetition in the play (about which I agree in details) by the “significant action” of the finale.

Consider the apologies for the stage in Henry V. We must take them seriously, if only because they are insisted upon repeatedly, but Shakespeare's theatre was no less equipped to put on Henry V than any other play. Except in the prologues, the play is strikingly unconcerned with representing grand military actions. The rhetoric of apology, then, is misleading. By announcing their interest in true representation, the prologues implicitly seek our affirmation that Henry, in historical truth, was the “mirror of Christian Kings.” The fact that the Henry the audience sees does not always measure up to
the ideal Henry of the choruses is unsettling, but the play always recalls the audience to its duty to celebrate its national hero. As Henry commands the troops (“On, on, you noblest English!” [3.1.17]), the choruses command the audience’s allegiance (“Follow, follow, grapple your minds” [3rd prologue, l. 17]) by making its presence necessary to unfolding the action of the play. Even if we hesitate, we know, like Katherine, that we must say yes, that we want to say yes. The reservations we harbor about rhetorical speech and an actor’s manipulation of his audience are tellingly evident in Julius Caesar. Space does not permit me to elaborate the dramaturgy of self-consciousness in Julius Caesar, but I refer the reader to Kenneth Burke’s remarks on audience involvement in “Antony in Behalf of the Play,” in The Philosophy of Literary Form, 2nd ed. (Baton Rouge, 1967), pp. 329-44. For a discussion of changes in Shakespeare's theatrical art around 1600, see Granville-Barker, “From Henry V to Hamlet,” in Aspects of Shakespeare, Being British Academy Lectures, ed. J. W. Mackail (Oxford, 1933); reprinted in More Prefaces to Shakespeare (Princeton, 1974), pp. 135-67.


Criticism: Themes: James W. Stone (essay date 1995)


[In the following essay, Stone studies Shakespeare’s representation of androgyny in Hamlet, and finds that the collapse of sexual difference in the play leads to a parallel disintegration of moral boundaries.]

Some wish to see in Hamlet a womanish, hesitating, flighty mind. To me he seems a manly, resolute, but thoughtful being.

I cannot see Hamlet as a man. The things he says, his impulses, his actions entirely indicate to me that he was a woman.

—Sarah Bernhardt

Hamlet has proven to be an interpretive mystery for critics interested in gender, a play whose proverbial excess of meaning has led some critics to gender the excess and the mystery of the text itself as feminine. Since the problem of this problem play is femininity as such, Ernest Jones was prompted to call Hamlet the Sphinx of modern literature, and Jacqueline Rose, following T. S. Eliot, calls it the Mona Lisa. In what follows I will explore the various ways androgyny, the collapse of sexual difference, is represented, whether in figuring Hamlet as a feminized, impotent man, or Gertrude as a masculinized, castrating woman. The penetration or invagination of one sex by the other leads, I argue, to the collapse of moral difference and of meaning, an undoing of boundaries described in terms of “incest,” “jointure,” “union,” and making opposites “common.” I aim to show how even the foundational distinctions between soul and body, and love and death, implode, since they depend upon a gendered hierarchy whose implicitly exclusionist assumptions the play disjoints.

Many gender critics of the 1970s, including some Shakespeareans, advanced the term “androgyny” to designate the harmonious reconciliation of sexual difference and friction. Theirs is an essentially comic notion deriving from the discordia concors or coincidentia oppositorum of Renaissance Neoplatonism as repopularized in Jungian psychology. This view of androgyny is imbued with the pious and nostalgic aim of recapturing the paradisiacal union of male and female components before the fall into separate and divisive sexes. Tragedy, according to this account, results from the impossibility of maintaining androgynous balance between man and woman. I believe instead that in Hamlet Shakespeare represents the way that androgynous
union engenders dissolution and death, both of which the play typecasts as feminine. The thesis that Hamlet's tragedy lies in his having to expel the woman in himself in order to take manly action and to re-establish sexual difference is belied by the catastrophic "union"—a word whose importance I will explore below—that concludes the tragic action.\(^3\) The union that erases the ambiguously gendered divisions between mind and body, deeds and words, duty and affect, gives rise to a catastrophic crisis of nondifference. This tragic endpoint reiterates precisely the quandary which diseases Denmark at the opening of the play, when the absence of difference signifies that nothing is taboo, including incest, adultery and murder.

The woman in Hamlet is as much a threat to him as the invaginating "mother"—"hysterica passio" (2.4.57)—is to Lear, the inextricable "woman's part" (2.5.20) is to Posthumus, and the (s)mothering Volumnia is to Coriolanus. Hamlet's inaction, which he and others characterize as feminine, stems from the fact that he is "as patient as the female dove" (5.1.273) and prone to "such a kind of gain-giving as would perhaps trouble a woman" (5.2.205).\(^4\) A defining axiom of the misogyny that pervades Hamlet is that the baser matter that contaminates male spirit is woman, in whose folds man is sexually implicated. Man's figuring of himself as spirit is ultimately literalized (fatally—"the letter killeth") as matter because man is born of woman. Shakespeare may intend a pun upon the Latin mater to suggest a resonant conflation of "mother" and "matter." Hamlet makes a pointed juxtaposition of these two words when Rosencrantz and Guildenstern relate that Gertrude wants to meet him in her closet: "But sir, such answer as I can make, you shall command—or rather, as you say, my mother. Therefore no more, but to the matter. My mother, you say—" (3.2.314-16). In the closet scene itself, Hamlet's opening remark is "Now, mother, what's the matter?" (3.4.7). The punning association of matter with mater, body with woman, points to the woman's part—her "country matters" (3.2.115)—that constitutes every man (as divided-invaginated).\(^5\)

The maternal inheritance or matter from which Hamlet struggles to disburden himself is oddly associated with his loquaciousness. In his third soliloquy he curses his propensity for words and feelings rather than deeds, for which Claudius has accused him of being "unmanly" (1.2.94):

> Why, what an ass am I! This is most brave, That I, the son of a dear father murthered, Prompted to my revenge by heaven and hell, Must like a whore unpack my heart with words And fall a-cursing like a very drab, A stallion!\(^6\)

(2.2.568-73)

The play associates the dilatory circumlocution of "words, words, words" (2.2.192) with the unchaste female who makes of man the necessarily debased image of herself—"whore," "drab," "stallion."\(^7\) Hamlet contrasts his purity of devotion to his ghostly father's memory with the contaminating adulteration that results from material embodiment: "And thy commandment all alone shall live / Within the book and volume of my brain, / Unmix'd with baser matter" (1.5.102-04). But just what distinction obtains between the father's spoken commandment and the feminizing words that Hamlet so outspokenly inveighs against for coming between himself and his filial duty? The mediation point between male and female speech is the body that both sexes share, that "mixture"\(^8\) of brain, book and matter that no verbal legerdemain can slant, no rationalization gloss over.

Hamlet's moment of resolute clarity unwittingly betrays his most persistent blind spot. For all his verbal facility, the speaking subject fails to note one of the basic tenets of his education in rhetoric and philosophy: the res or substance of an idea is its matter, whereas the word that gropes to express it concretely is the verbum. By the logic of this standard rhetorical distinction, the matter or substance of Hamlet's thoughts is feminine, while the words of the paternal commandment are masculine. Precisely when Hamlet insists upon his unmixed indebtedness and loyalty to paternal spirit (verbum) he betrays the maternal origin without which his and his father's words would be groundless because immaterial. If one hierarchy posits male spirit as that which inseminates, informs or animates female matter, a subversive and opposite conception insists on the
ideational matter that gives birth to words, words that express at best imperfectly their material / maternal origin.9

Hamlet feels that his inheritance from suckling Gertrude's maternal matter is moral because corporal contamination: “I am myself indifferent honest, but yet I could accuse me of such things that it were better my mother had not borne me” (3.1.122-24)10 The original malaise of origin is exacerbated in the next developmental stage of incorporating the drab-whore-stallion's language—another kind of matter—whose sole profit, Hamlet suspects, is the ability to articulate his malaise, curse it and thereby suffer it the worse. Hamlet's apostrophe to Gertrude—“Frailty, thy name is woman” (1.2.146)—applies as well to (the woman in) himself. He is a subject divided by the loss (of purity, of self-presence, of the father)11 that subjectivity presupposes, since the speaking subject attempts to recoup via language a loss that language itself has occasioned. Although words render Hamlet too effeminate to perform male deeds, the law of the father that enjoins the son to take dutiful action in the father's name expresses itself by means of the same linguistic mechanism that makes its fulfillment, in the third soliloquy quoted above, seem impossible. Words are indifferently the vehicle of both paternal law—Hamlet's pledge of filial allegiance to “thy commandment” (1.5.102) and the “ghost's word” (3.2.280); “Now to my word” (1.5.110), he says as he screws up his courage—and of its breach and adulteration. The recognition of this nondifference between male and female speech, between performative and expressive utterance, is what undoes Hamlet's best intentions to act (1.5.29-31), leaving him prisoner to his ineffectual self-reproaches, which are the melancholic introjection of his misogynistic reaction to the women in whose folds he senses himself helplessly implicated.12

Since woman is the Other who symbolizes self-loss for the man, it is no surprise that Hamlet's soliloquies are touched with a misogynistic animus and a melancholic infatuation with suicide as release from feminine and feminizing loss. The violence that Hamlet is called upon to effect in the father's name is what spells the sacrifice of those feminine qualities of loquacious inaction that some critics have regarded as Hamlet's most ingratiating characteristic. It is these same feminine qualities, however, that excite in Hamlet the urge to violence in the first place, a violence that aims to expel the feminine from within him. This violence is turned suicidally inwards; “manly” action gives way to melancholic enervation. Hamlet's initial resolve to remain faithful to his father's memory dissolves into suicidal self-disgust:

O that this too too sullied flesh would melt, Thaw and resolve itself into a dew, Or that the Everlasting had not fix'd His canon 'gainst self-slaughter. O God! O God!

(1.2.129-32)

Dissolution of the sullied because “solid” (Folio) flesh motivates the suicidal urge, whose promise is the body's liquefaction. Ophelia, whom many critics have regarded as Hamlet's estranged feminine self,13 will seek the same watery solace, the dissolution of resolution, in her suicide. In Hamlet's case suicide is figured in terms of orgasmic melting and post-coital flaccidity, the relieving of a tension.14 The impulse for such release through sexual climax is paradoxically Hamlet's sense of disgust at being indissolubly imbedded in his sexual body. Insofar as his body is sullied by sexuality, it is regarded as feminine. The law of the father forbids trying to escape the feminine by means of masturbatory self-slaughter: seeking to kill desire by extinguishing the demands localized in the phallus. But man's imperative goal of self-identity is fractured under what it type-genders paranoiacally as the subversive influence of feminine difference and dissolution. Male “resolve” to do the father's bidding suddenly means quite the opposite, “resolve” as suicidal dissolve, which frees one from paternal obligation. This contradictory use of the same word instances what Freud calls the antithetical meaning of primal words.15 What Freud sees as a difference of meaning that divides the putatively self-identical can be subsumed as well under the rubric of difference of gender. Antithetical gender confusion is implicit in the liquid imagery of the passage, which may be interpreted as male sexual discharge or the symbol of dearly besought female dissolution of the father's law.
In this first soliloquy Hamlet curses the lust that hastens Gertrude to an incestuous remarriage, a lust that patently belies her masking self-representation as “Niobe, all tears” (1.2.149). Here unfolds a curious paradox: To forgo the whoring maternal flesh Hamlet contemplates resolving himself into a watery dew, but this water gets refuged as the salt water of woman's tears, which represent the hypocritical disguise of a body more compact with lust than mourning. If being embodied taints Hamlet with the legacy of woman, his proposed escape from the maternal body by dissolving it is no less implicated in the language of female lust and hypocritical masquerade. The extinction that death promises as end point is but the return to an inescapable origin—what Hamlet will designate in his most famous soliloquy as the “undiscover'd country” (3.1.79)—a maternally presence that dissolves duty and the father's law, such as the everlasting father's “canon 'gainst self-slaughter.” Suicide is an escape from the maternal yet also the temptation of the maternal as that which licenses a return to (intrauterine?) deliquescence.

Laertes serves as Hamlet's mimetic double with respect to the imagery of water. He is the rival who swear to take action immediately upon hearing of Ophelia's death by drowning, rather than avoid the responsibility for vengeance by dwelling upon thoughts of watery dissolution or the expense of melancholy tears:

Too much of water hast thou, poor Ophelia, And therefore I forbid my tears. But yet It is our trick; nature her custom holds, Let shame say what it will. (Weeps.) When these are gone, The woman will be out.

(4.7.184-88)

Laertes expels womanly tears as the only means of preserving his manly vigor intact. The same dewy tears that Laertes seeks to purge are the responsibility-dissolving liquefaction, the sweet consummation of death, that Hamlet dreams of merging with by melting into. But in the closet scene Hamlet adopts a more “masculine” position, asking his father not to look upon him with pity lest he “convert / My stern effects. Then what I have to do / Will want true colour—tears perchance for blood” (3.4.128-30). Hamlet's forswearing of tears for the rhetoric of blood vengeance will make him indistinguishable from Laertes by the time that they square off together in the graveyard scene.

Whether tears in Hamlet's first soliloquy represent Niobe's sincere expression of grief or Gertrude's masquerade of seeming, they serve variously to define the bifurcated feminine. In his initial appearance in the play, Hamlet in black dress takes pains to distance himself from ornamental or seeming mourning, dismissing tears as so many feigned motions of actors:

Seems, madam? Nay, it is. I know not “seems.” 'Tis not alone my inky cloak, good mother, Nor customary suits of solemn black, Nor windy suspiration of forc'd breath, No, nor the fruitful river in the eye, Nor the dejected haviour of the visage, Together with all forms, moods, shapes of grief, That can denote me truly. These indeed seem, For they are actions that a man might play; But I have that within which passes show, These but the trappings and the suits of woe.

(1.2.76-86)

His scorn for seeming notwithstanding, soon enough Hamlet will act if not feign the madman's part. In this passage and what follows I am concerned with the feminine associations of neither feigning nor madness, but rather with the inconsistent disavowal of tears and of playing.

In his third soliloquy the fickle prince admires the Player, the man who plays the woman's part, for his convincing simulation of tears. By the time that the players arrive in Elsinore, Hamlet has come to believe that public show is the sole means to plumb private conscience and that the only sincere expression of inner grief
is paradoxically its impersonation on a public stage, completely reversing his earlier contempt for the actor's "fruitful river in the eye." Initially Hamlet envies the woman's role portrayed by the Player because it differs so markedly from the female roles that he characterizes himself as having played up to this point, the roles of antic fool and madman. Hecuba's "bisson rheum" (2.2.502) in response to the slaying of her husband "would have made milch the burning eyes of heaven / And passion in the gods" (2.2.513-14). This conflation of weeping and lactary nurturing, as if the slain husband is his wife's child (Niobe, all tears), serves to foil Gertrude's tearful posturing, but ultimately Hamlet comes to recognize Hecuba's reality as that of an impersonated representation, a "fiction" evacuated of real motive, as yet another masquerading "nothing":

O what a rogue and peasant slave am I! Is it not monstrous that the player here, But in a fiction, in a dream of passion, Could force his soul so to his own conceit That from her working all his visage wann'd, Tears in his eyes, distraction in his aspect, A broken voice, and his whole function suiting With forms to his conceit? And all for nothing! For Hecuba! What's Hecuba to him, or he to her, That he should weep for her? What would he do Had he the motive and the cue for passion That I have? He would drown the stage with tears, And cleave the general ear with horrid speech, Make mad the guilty and appal the free, Confound the ignorant, and amaze indeed The very faculties of eyes and ears.

(2.2.544-60)

If Hecuba were not a representational fiction, one would conclude from this passage that emotion secures action: Feminine tears are not opposed to masculine revenge but are instead the motivating guarantee of its success. However, it is precisely the feminine side of his nature that Hamlet scapegoats for his "pigeon-liver'd" (2.2.573) cowardliness, castigating himself in this same soliloquy, as we have seen, for being a wordy drab-whore-stallion. The very words by which Hamlet bolsters his courage to act are the vehicle for dilation since they defer action by substituting for it. The various distinctions that Hamlet mediates between sincere and feigned tears, acting and playacting, deeds and words can all be subsumed under the general rubric of male and female. But such easy dichotomies do not hold, for the play insists on the antithetical collapse of primal antinomies.

Hamlet charts clear-cut distinction between himself and the Player's fictional Hecuba, the good woman, but he is able to locate scant difference between himself and the real bad woman whose flesh and word are indistinct from his. Difference obtains between men until they are linked sexually by the bond of a common woman. Hamlet remarks the difference between his father and Claudius—"So excellent a king, that was to this / Hyperion to a satyr" (1.2.139-40); and he interjects the difference between his cowardly self and the archetypal hero into the triangle formed by his rival father figures—"My father's brother—but no more like my father / Than I to Hercules" (1.2.152-53). Because the bad woman makes of Hyperion (Hamlet's father) a satyr (Claudius), of Hercules a Hamlet, then by the chiastic terms of the analogy she makes of Hamlet a lascivious satyr like Claudius. Of a self-possessed man she makes the effeminate coward that is Hamlet's consistent self-identification when taking stock of himself in the first four soliloquies.

Hamlet blames the bad woman with whom he is inextricably intertwined for his vacillation between virile resolve and conscientious scrupling. That man and woman are interconnected—that man is dependent, not author of himself—gives rise to his misogyny. The origin of his disgust for woman is man's origin and telos in woman, in what he metaphorizes as her "undiscover'd country." The darkness of this region of sex and death is what Hamlet points to as the cause of his effeminizing cowardice:

Thus conscience does make cowards of us all, And thus the native hue of resolution Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought, And enterprises of great pitch and moment With this regard their currents turn awry And lose the name of action.
Conscience is masculine “resolution” to do one's duty. In antithetical fashion it also acts to resolve (dissolve) obligation, in the feminizing sense advanced in my reading of the liquid images above. The decline of “pitch” may suggest fears of post-coital flaccidity and the loss of manliness. But the resolution assured by conscience is “native,” a gift from the mother. How can conscience impel one forward to take manly action, on the one hand, yet transform one into an irresolute coward, on the other? As the swelling of thought and of conscientiousness that forecloses action, religious conscience prohibits murder and leaves vengeance to God alone. A very different conscience is expressed by the Ghost, the unwelcome paternal superego that exacts the killing of Claudius even as it forbids Hamlet to kill himself. Conscience makes contradictory demands because it fails to reconcile the masculine and feminine elements that it comprises. It epitomizes the gendered ambivalence (androgyyny) between male and female, spirit and body, action and cowardice: binarisms that don't align themselves in any consistent parallelism, but rather criss-cross androgynously.21

Hamlet's melancholy and madness are, like conscience, represented in terms of the feminine that both fractures and empowers him. Although Hamlet castigates himself for being “unpregnant of my cause” (2.2.563) due to cowardice, Claudius sees in his nephew's psyche a woman whose plotting he likens to an oedipally menacing parturition:

There's something in his soul O'er which his melancholy sits on brood, And I do doubt the hatch and the disclose Will be some danger.

Here for a change feminine melancholy is thought to give rise to consequential activity. Like Richard II's self-reflexive “My brain I'll prove the female to my soul, / My soul the father, and these two beget / A generation of still-breeding thoughts” (5.5.6-8), Hamlet's broodings are his parthenogenic progeny (brood); they disclose the only (living) kin he is willing to acknowledge. Gertrude characterizes Hamlet's madness as his brooding and breeding internal female:

This is mere madness, And thus awhile the fit will work on him. Anon, as patient as the female dove When her golden couplets are disclos'd, His silence will sit drooping.

The oscillation from the fit of “mere” (French “mother”) madness to patient silence, both characterized as feminine extremes, traces Hamlet's manic depression in terms of feminine fickleness.23 Hamlet is capable of both destructive violence and peaceable generativity, the feminine double bind that constitutes him.24

Once the feminine is abstracted from the physical body and becomes a disembodied metaphor, it ceases to be threatening. Following literary and philosophical convention, Hamlet refers to the soul that informs his body as the feminine anima. This feminine in himself bonds homosocially with the same element in Horatio, Hamlet's soulmate: “Since my dear soul was mistress of her choice, / And could of men distinguish her election, / Sh'ath seal'd thee for herself” (3.2.63-65). Horatio displaces Ophelia as Hamlet's bosom bondman because he is safely desexualized. He is feminine insofar as he represents the allegorized rational soul, but he has excised the (feminizing) madness and passion of sexual desire, whose deleterious world-historical influence is personified in the play as the fickle whore Fortune. Hamlet admires in Horatio that he has been.

As one, in suff'ring all, that suffers nothing, A man that Fortune's buffets and rewards Hast 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.

(3.2.66-74)

We have seen that Hamlet contrasts “the motive and the cue for passion” that should inspire him to act with the Player's imaginarily motivated passions. Since the prince is “patient” like a female dove and “patient” and “passion” are etymologically equivalent in designating passive suffering, then what Hamlet envies in Horatio is his freedom from female melancholy, the manic depressive roller coaster sometimes figured as Fortune's wheel.25

Female Fortune is also identified with the type of wheeling and extravagant opportunism that Hamlet so despises in Rosencrantz and Guildenstern: male varlets whose “privates” are collusively cross-coupled with the “secret parts of Fortune” (2.2.234-35) to form an illicit because hermaphroditic union. Like the whore Fortune they try to manipulate Hamlet's pipe: “You would play upon me, you would seem to know my stops, you would pluck out the heart of my mystery, you would sound me from my lowest note to the top of my compass” (3.2.355-58). At this point Hamlet regards himself no longer as a male whore, a minion-slave of the strumpet Fortune, whose threat, which Rosencrantz and Guildenstern personify, has become manifestly external and therefore easier for Hamlet to confound. In act 4 Hamlet will take fatal Fortune into his own hands by disposing of his old schoolfellow conspirators and thus disburdening himself of the feminizing menace that they personify. And by the ultimate scene of the play he will be able to bolster his sense of masculine courage by heaping abuse upon the foppish courtier Osric, who represents the no longer threatening feminine that the mature Hamlet can easily dismiss.

One consequence of Hamlet's inability to isolate and then excise the woman from himself is that the distinctions he tries to draw between other people are as confused as he is self-divided sexually. In the closet scene with his mother, Hamlet protests too much in overdrawing the contrast between the “counterfeit presentment” (3.4.54) of the elder Hamlet and of Claudius. Beneath the son's defensively schematic opposition between ideal and nightmare father figures, Hyperion and satyr, lurks the doubt that they are not so different after all, since Gertrude has held both in common. Although Hamlet asserts that “sense to ecstasy were ne'er so thrall'd / But it reserv'd some quantity of choice / To serve in such a difference” (74-76), he criticizes in his mother the appropriation of sense by ecstasy and the resulting loss of difference. With the woman on top sense loses its hierarchic superiority over sensuousness, its subversive contrary, and reason becomes merely the instrument for satisfying desire: “And reason panders will” (88). That Hamlet's father represents reason and his stepfather will is only an ideal presentment shown to be “counterfeit” since reason and will are not opposed but in collusion, rendered common in Gertrude's faulted vice.26 It is as if the elder Hamlet (reason) acts as pander-advocate for his own cuckolding, the willful coupling of Claudius and Gertrude. What belies the schematically contrasting portraits that Hamlet uses to badger his mother is his description of Claudius as “a king of shreds and patches—” (103), followed immediately by the stage direction “Enter Ghost.” The referent of Hamlet's interrupted word portrait is indifferently Claudius and the elder Hamlet, since invoking the one seems to call up the other. Gertrude says that Hamlet's vision of the Ghost is an hallucination induced by “ecstasy” (140), the very faculty whose improper dominance Hamlet said caused Gertrude's failure to recognize the difference between Claudius and the elder Hamlet. The ultimate failure of proper difference is that the rational faculty of differentiation in both Hamlet and Gertrude has ceded place to mother and son's common bond of ecstasy.27

In a way similar to his counterfeit portrayal of the collapsed rival father figures, it is impossible for Hamlet to separate Gertrude and Ophelia despite their ostensible differences. Whereas he tries but fails to keep the father figures separate, Hamlet doesn't seem to want to distinguish between the women in his life. What he calls Ophelia's “painting” (3.1.144) dovetails with his criticism of Gertrude's masquerade of mourning. The sexual contamination that Hamlet insists upon attributing to his mother is transferred to Ophelia, who is the target of
her friend's obscene wit just before their joint spectatorship of The Murder of Gonzago. The remark that Ophelia should sequester herself in a “nunnery” (3.1.121) is famously subversive: Is a nunnery where a young woman goes to preserve her chastity, or a brothel in which she squanders it; a place of sexual renunciation, or one of carnal indulgence? Does this once fundamental distinction still make any difference? Gertrude’s position as whore (in her son’s eyes) crosses over indifferently onto Ophelia’s chaste body, making of apparently antithetical contraries an indistinguishable conjunctive union.

It is against this union of what should be opposites—ideal and debased fathers, chaste and unchaste women, spirit and body—that Hamlet inveighs when he attacks the conjunction of sexual opposites: “I say we will have no mo marriage” (3.1.149). Precisely this copular mixing of the sexes has informed Hamlet since birth, and we have seen that it is this contamination of origins that engenders mature thoughts of suicide. Hamlet can no more escape the fallen transformation of chastity (the “honesty” of mind) into heterosexual coupling (the telos of bodily “beauty”) than he can avoid his own originary embodiment: “The power of beauty will sooner transform honesty from what it is to a bawd than the force of honesty can translate beauty into his likeness” (3.1.111-14). Beauty belies honesty because honesty itself is not honest; honesty panders beauty. Hamlet thematizes the way that corporal beauty gives the lie to honesty when he plays upon the possibility of lying in the sexual sense with the nunnery-destined because dishonest Ophelia: “Lady, shall I lie in your lap? … That’s a fair thought to lie between maids’ legs.” The provocative allusions to “country matters” and to Ophelia’s reductive, genital “nothing” (3.2.110-20) imply that Hamlet’s lying in her beautified lap is the cause of dishonest moral lapse in herself and others. Revulsion is Hamlet’s response to the genital materiality of woman, which makes of her chastity a nothing, of her honesty a lie.

Hamlet’s misogynistic banter early in 3.2 is a prelude to the staging of The Murder of Gonzago, a play within the play that thematizes the origin of man’s disgust for woman, whose effects have already evidenced themselves preposterously in Hamlet’s prescriptive fore-play with Ophelia. In recounting the scene of his death, the Ghost tells Hamlet that “the serpent that did sting thy father’s life / Now wears his crown” (1.5.39-40), the crown symbolizing both his kingship and his wife’s genitalia. The liquid poured in the ear is a deathly bane that undoes the vital liquid that King Hamlet once disseminated in a homologous orifice. The contrary valences of the liquid image—semen = life versus semen = poison—instance Shakespeare’s antithetical pharmakon. King Hamlet is represented as emasculated. Coppélia Kahn notes the sexual confusion that the Ghost engenders in Hamlet in asking the son to identify with the feminized father: “The elder Hamlet is in the feminine position of being penetrated by the man who has already penetrated his wife.” The play within the play that Hamlet stages is an attempt to recall, replay and thereby undo the scene of the elder Hamlet’s death. If Hamlet sees a mimetic representation of his father penetrated and the reaction to it of the guilty spectators, he reasons that this will provide him sufficient motive for taking manly revenge, which entails the reassertion of the law of the father that the murder (and Gertrude’s adultery) breached.

Manly revenge may be all the easier if Hamlet can demonstrate that his adversary, who wears the sexually ambiguous crown, is only a castrated, petticoat king, a replicated reflection of the turn that he effected upon his brother king. Perhaps Hamlet identifies the feminine in his own conscience with something similar in his stepfather, which will make the latter vulnerable to being caught by the play within the play: “The play's the thing / Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the King” (2.2.600-01). The Mousetrap conflates Claudius’s captured conscience with Gertrude’s, whose pet name, “Mouse,” is echoed in the closet scene. After the play within the play Hamlet uses the same “king”/“thing” rhyme and another double entendre with vaginal referent to express his confidence that Claudius has been hollowed into an empty shell: “The King is a thing … / Of nothing” (4.2.27-29). If both Claudius and King Hamlet are reduced to a feminized nothing, the distinction between them must have collapsed in Hamlet’s mind.

Stanley Cavell advances the provocative thesis that Claudius is both father and mother in Hamlet's dumb-show, because it substitutes Claudius as a veil for Hamlet’s mother, the murderer behind the murderer. (“None wed the second but who kill'd the first” (3.2.175). The dumb-show is a re-visioning of the unseen
original murder, which it reenacts with the mother-father (Claudius covering for, and acting at the behest of, Gertrude) taking the masculine position by pouring poison into the man's ear, reversing the scenario in the primal scene (of intercourse), where the woman is the passive receptacle of what the man pours. My quarrel with Cavell is his assumption that Gertrude was passive in the primal scene, whereas in the murder scene she turns around suddenly and assumes the aggressor's stance. We may suspect that Hamlet has entertained the deep fantasy of a “masculine” Gertrude all along: In the primal scene that continues to haunt his unconscious, Hamlet is traumatized by the vision of his father castrated (feminized) in the act of intercourse. Gertrude is imagined as the masculine aggressor in the two original scenes of sex and murder, of Death (Hamlet's “consummation / Devoutly to be wish'd” (3.1.63-64)) as the punning conflation (climactic-extinctive) of these two senses, which are but different manifestations of the same horror in the male imagination. In appropriating the masculine powers of her husband, Gertrude renders him impotent, the ghostly hollow of his former self, and so she must proceed adulterously to some other man to satisfy her swelling urge for sexual jointure. Hamlet describes the fierceness of Gertrude's desire for his father in terms that ominously suggest a voraciousness that, like a parasite's, devours its object to the bone and so must prey elsewhere: “She would hang on him / As if increase of appetite had grown / By what it fed on” (1.2.143-45). Gertrude's devouring orality knows no bounds, for every taboo which poses a resistance only serves the more to excite her transgressive desire.

The confusion of man and woman explicitly reaches the collapsing point of nondifference when Hamlet takes his leave of Claudius in order to begin his journey for England. He propounds a syllogism which intertwines the sexes incestuously and androgynously:

HAM.  
Farewell, dear mother.  

KING.  
Thy loving father, Hamlet.  

HAM.  
My mother. Father and mother is man and wife, man and wife is one flesh; so my mother.  

(4.3.52-55)

Hamlet's ostensibly innocent allusion to the biblical idealization of sexual union in marriage points instead of a nonideal, incestuous materialization. The prince is revolted by the interchangeability of parts (partners) in the sexual act, whose locus Sonnet 137 suggestively designates as the genital “common place” (1.10), the place where man and woman (as well as the elder Hamlet and Claudius, the ideal and degraded father images) become indistinguishable in the chaotic coupling of mother-father. Ernest Jones explains the mother-father confusion in terms of the psychoanalytic “combined parent concept” (113), in which the child imagines its parents as one flesh in coitus. Hamlet's chop-logic employs the rhetorical commonplace of chiasmus to signify and to predicate the reduction of sexual difference to the common genital site where the sexes are indifferently one (androgynous).

It is the misogynistic representation of woman as duplicitous masquerader that marks the focal point of Hamlet as a tragedy; the play passes beyond the ideal specularity of comedy to a specifically linguistic duplicity and subjectifying self-division, the principle of difference which patriarchal, misogynistic discourse takes woman to be. Gertrude's crossing of sexual boundaries and collapsing of difference informs the androgyny that so conspicuously marks Hamlet's character. Whereas female unfaithfulness suggests a complication that comic transvestism turns into a joke, insofar as the transvestic disguise miraculously defuses
the charge of cuckoldry, the perception of woman's adultery in the tragedies incites a catastrophe of nondifference. Gertrude's incestuous duplicity sloughs off external disguises that are merely specular and therefore comic in favor of a masculinely aggressive jointure, effected via duplicitous language, of things that are normally and normatively contrary. Her violation of the incest taboo, which insists on keeping one's husband and brother-in-law distinct, leads to a collapse of difference in general. It is on account of Gertrude, the “imperial jointress” (1.2.9), i.e., the one who undoes difference by effecting jointure, that “the time is out of joint” (1.5.196). She is responsible for making “the night joint-labourer with the day” (1.1.81) and for the undoing of propriety (proper difference) that results when “the funeral baked meats … coldly furnish forth the marriage tables” (1.2.180-81).

Woman is the principle of difference that paradoxically collapses difference, reducing Claudius, Hamlet, and Hamlet's father to the commonly denominated nexus of Gertrude's shared body. The word “common” occurs several times to designate the universal reductionism of death: “Thou know'st 'tis common: all that lives must die” (1.2.72); “(Reason's) common theme / Is death of fathers” (1.2.103-4). Death is the common lot of everyone born of woman's “common place,” the uncanny home (unheimlich heim) that makes of woman man's genesis (womb) and his destined end (tomb). In the “To be, or not to be” soliloquy, Hamlet's fears of death situate their imaginary locus in “the undiscover'd country, from whose bourn / No traveller returns” (3.1.79-80). The latent pun on the genital sense of “country” equates death with woman's hell, her not so Elysian Fields. The nether country is where man and woman are at one in the three developmental stages of birth, copulation, and death.

The sexes are made common in the primal scene of copulation and of death. Often in Shakespeare's plays “death” puns upon the chiastic indistinction (or so the man imagines) of the sexes in orgasm. Death as the climactic collapse of male potency also points to castration anxiety. Although these senses of “dying” are not foregrounded in Hamlet at the level of local wordplay, they are a motivating thematic concern overall. Love is literalized (materialized) as death in the figure of Lamord, the Norman knight who rides “incorps'd” (4.7.86) upon the back of his horse, whose punning name collapses death (la mort) and love (l'amour, or the Latin amor). The erotic instincts aim towards the same release of tension that death grants, and life and death are tellingly juxtaposed (“incorps'd”) in Laertes's exclamatory pseudo-recognition, “Upon my life, Lamord” (4.7.91). Lamord is like Hamlet a death messenger who adorns himself in the gallant's fashionable jewels: “the brooch indeed / And gem of all the nation” (4.7.92-93). In mimetically similar terms Ophelia describes Hamlet as formerly “Th' expectancy and rose of the fair state, / The glass of fashion and the mould of form” (3.1.154-55), though of course he subsequently drapes himself in deathly black, as if to say that love and mourning describe the singular and identical trajectory of every embodied consciousness. The love gem as poisoned death trafficer comes to a head in the “union” jewel of the final scene of the play.

Life and death are conjoined in a cyclical and interanimating feeding process:

HAM.

For if the sun breed maggots in a dead dog, being a good kissing carrion—Have you a daughter?

POL.

I have, my lord.

HAM.

Let her not walk i' th' sun. Conception is a blessing, but as your daughter may conceive—friend,

(2.2.181-86)
Conception is corruption, and conversely; life generates spontaneously from death, only to provide more grist for death's maw. Hamlet himself is the maggot son bred from the conjunction of living sun (Hamlet as father) and dead matter (mater): “I am too much in the sun” (1.2.67), he laments, as if to suggest that his exalted origins have overripened and putrefied. The necrophilic self-identification as cadaver-bred maggot suggests at once a sperm breeding and a parasite feeding. Love reduced to deathly parasitism is an analogue for the way that the liquid poured in King Hamlet's ear and the union wine consumed in the final scene are both conjunctive-inseminating and poisonous, with the latter sense parodic of and parasitic upon the former, taking precedence. The chaliced union wine is a parasitic parody of the Communion wine of the Last Supper, the drinking and eating of a dead body in order to gain life thereby.

Whether sex is poisonous or generative is also at the heart of the characterization of Ophelia, who is regarded with extreme ambivalence as an exemplar of unchaste beauty in life and chaste idealization in death. In terms of the analogy by which she is fixed in the passage quoted above from act 2, scene 2, Ophelia is like rotting flesh which breeds, only to have her brood turn around and devour its life source incestuously. Flesh as food for maggots—“We fat all creatures else to fat us, and we fat ourselves for maggots” (4.3.21-23)—contrasts with Laertes' remark at Ophelia's funeral about the regenerative powers of her virgin body to conceive immaculately: “Lay her i'th' earth, / And from her fair and unpolluted flesh / May violets spring” (5.1.231-33).

Maggots or violets; dishonest or virginal woman; conception as curse or as blessing? To these confused binarisms Gertrude adds the “Lamord” question: epithalamion or funeral?

(scattering flowers) Sweets to the sweet. Farewell. I hop'd thou shouldst have been my Hamlet's wife: I thought thy bride-bed to have deck'd, sweet maid, And not have strew'd thy grave.

(5.1.236-39)

Dead flowers substitute for marital defloration and “dying.” Gertrude the jointress again does what Hamlet reproached her for in act 1 when he complained that “the funeral bak'd meats / Did coldly furnish forth the marriage tables” (1.2.180-81). Elegy is but a cover for matrimonial lust in Hamlet's deflating satire.

The collapse of love and death reaches its hyperbolic climax when Hamlet and Laertes, the rival lovers, leap into (penetrate) the open grave for one last necrophilic embrace (with Ophelia, with/against each other). Hamlet can achieve his devoutly wished love consummation only with a corpse, and in the next scene he will consummate his death wish by becoming incorpsed in himself. Hamlet points to the paradox of Laertes's being “buried quick” (5.1.274) with Ophelia, an act of hyperbolic excess that he vows to imitate mimetically:

And if thou prate of mountains, let them throw Millions of acres on us, till our ground, Singeing his pate against the burning zone, Make Ossa like a wart. Nay, and thou'l' mouth, I'll rant as well as thou.

(5.1.275-79)

Hamlet and Laertes become indistinguishable in their rhetorical overreaching, as well as in their ostentatious sacrifice of the quick for the dead. Earlier in this scene, before he knows that the grave is destined for Ophelia, Hamlet feels confident that he can distinguish between the living and the dead in much the same way as he can differentiate between truth and lying. He says that the Gravedigger “lies” in the grave in both senses of the word. “Thou dost lie in't, to be in't, and say 'tis thine. 'Tis for the dead, not for the quick: therefore thou liest” (122-24). When Hamlet jumps into the grave, he literalizes his earlier wordplay (3.2) about how much he would like to lie with Ophelia's nothing, her death (nothing)-breeding genitals (nothing).
The state of the union (political, matrimonial) that words like “Lamord” symbolize is epitomized not only in the incestuous union of Gertrude and Claudius—their love is the elder Hamlet's death—but also in the pearled “union” (5.2.269) that joins and unjoins the lovers. “Union” is both union (marriage jewel) and disunion (poison), a liebestod that reengages the paradoxically inseminating poison of the primal scene/murder scene. “Union” is one of Freud's uncanny “un” words whose primal sense is antithetical, both itself and not itself. This doubling dissolution is gendered (by men) as feminine, as that which introduces difference into male notions of self-identity predicated on self-sameness. As the union pearl is dissolved in the cup of wine, so too the royal place in the hierarchy which the union symbolizes—the term is normally reserved for pearls of finest quality, such as might be in a royal crown—is dissolved in death, reminding us of Hamlet's malcontent satire on the power of death to undo social as well as sexual distinction by making common the king and the commoner: “a king may go a progress through the guts of a beggar” (4.3.30-31) thanks to the anal reductionism of “impolitic worms,” for which “your fat king and your lean beggar is but variable service, two dishes, but to one table.” Since Hamlet has referred to himself as a beggar (2.2.272), in death he and Claudius will be indistinguishably incorpored. The androgynous “Lady Worm” (5.1.87) is the phallic penetrator and oral, feminine devourer that reduces the courtier, lawyer, and jester, the mother and her son, to the same level as the commoner in the grave. As high is reduced to low on the axis of social status, so sexual distinctions are likewise undone in death, as in birth and intercourse. Their collapse is what sets off the chain of deaths in the play, which in turn viciously reestablishes the cycle of sexual nondifference (a corpse of whichever sex is still a just a corpse).

Critics have frequently remarked upon Hamlet's shift in character upon his return from England, usually describing it in terms of a new resolution and stoicism. I prefer instead to see in the later Hamlet someone who is far less anxious about the collapse of boundaries, to the point that he decides that there is but one way to resolve his formerly unresolved anxiety about nondifference: destroy difference via the massive implosion that death effects. The death that Hamlet once feared so obsessively ultimately becomes the lover he embraces (graphically symbolized when he enters Ophelia's grave). When Hamlet assumes the manly role of avenger in the final scene and realizes the fantasy playacting of Lucianus, he penetrates the feminized Claudius with his poisoned phallic sword. Revenge seeks by repetition of the primal scene to undo the original crime. But the compulsion to repeat engages as well the drive towards death, fulfilling Hamlet's prophetic sense that his realization of manhood was fated to achieve but a reductive quintessence of dust, a return to residual matter (mater). Hamlet's consummating manly gesture is vitiated in that the hero collapses again into his mother: like hers, his affiliation (union) with the husband-father, whom he has addressed as “mother,” is fatally poisonous, a suicidal resolution figured as liquifying dissolve. The androgyynous sexual mixture that consummately joins male and female, I have argued, is the indistinction of death. Death returns man to the undiscovered country whence he originated, the place where he and woman are joined (fou tre) in a common fault or fold, cross-coupled in nondifference. It is through metaphors of “mixture,” “jointure,” and “union”—rendering the sexes “common”—that Shakespeare plays out the poisonous consequences of androgyyn.

“Hamlet is part hysteric, as Freud said, and part Puritan in his disgust at contamination and his idealization of his absent father. But he is also, as Goethe was the first to say, part woman. And Goethe was wrong, as Freud was wrong, to assume that ‘woman means weakness. To equate women with weak and tainted bodies, words, and feelings while men possess noble reason and ambitious purpose is to participate in Denmark’s disease that divides mind from body, act from feeling, man from woman” (111). In Shakespeare’s Division of Experience (New York: Summit Books, 1981), Marilyn French concurs with Carolyn Heilbrun that action is the province of the man, whereas Hamlet’s “primary response to experience is to ‘feel it—through sensation, emotion, or reflective thought. Hamlet’s response to life, then, is ‘feminine’ (147). In The Mystery of Hamlet (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott, 1881), the Victorian scholar Edward P. Vining made the first detailed argument for Hamlet as a woman, locating Hamlet’s femininity in such features as his melancholy, playacting (masquerade), hysteria, faintness, mysteriousness, gentleness, wordy poetizing, (feigned) madness, lack of strength or courage to act—features “that are far more in keeping with a feminine than with a masculine nature” (48). Vining thought that Hamlet was in fact a woman disguised at birth as a man, like Ovid’s Iphis, because Gertrude knew that her husband wanted a boy. From his mother’s disguise of him as a girl, Hamlet learned “dissimulation” (82). The following toss-off is typical of Vining’s tendentiousness: “Hamlet has a woman’s daintiness and sensitiveness to perfumes” (77).

4. Unless otherwise noted, all quotations from Hamlet are from the Arden edition of the play, ed. Harold Jenkins (New York: Routledge, 1982).

5. Margaret Ferguson discusses the conflation of mother and matter in “Hamlet: Letters and Spirits,” in Shakespeare and the Question of Theory, eds. Patricia Parker and Geoffrey Hartman (New York: Methuen, 1985). Ferguson argues that the hysteria that Freud diagnosed in Hamlet results from the hero’s maternal/material legacy: “As we hear or see in the word ‘matter the Latin term for mother, we may surmise that the common Renaissance association between female nature in general and the ‘lower realm of matter is here being deployed in the service of Hamlet’s complex oedipal struggle. The mother is the matter that comes between the father and the son—and it is no accident that in this closet scene Hamlet’s sexual hysteria rises to its highest pitch” (295). See also Patricia Parker, “Othello and Hamlet: Dilation, Spying, and the ‘Secret Place of Woman,” Representations 44 (Fall 1993): 60-95.

6. In lieu of the Folio’s scullion, the reading printed in the Arden edition, I opt tendentiously for the Second Quarto’s stallion = “male whore,” a choice of words that better fits Hamlet's sense of compromised masculinity. The animal virility suggested by stallion is undercut by the reference to prostitution which Hamlet and Hamlet associate with women.

7. In his commentary on the function of language in Lacan, Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen points to the way speech disengages the speaker from the present immediacy of intuition, absenting the object that speech intends to capture by naming it, and thereby opening up a loss within the speaker himself that makes of him a subject. “The subject speak(s) in order to say nothing: ‘Words, words, words. … Speech, instead of saying something, now speaks itself and thus speaks the truth, which is precisely that speech says nothing—nothing other than the ‘hole in the real that is the subject at the moment when he speaks” (139). Naming the object leaves in its wake “nothing but words, words, words—that is, a subject” (193). Lacan: The Absolute Master, trans. Douglas Brick (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1991). The “nothing” that the subject speaks is gendered feminine in Hamlet's bewdy remarks to Ophelia during the play within the play. For the male, to become a subject is to fall under the sign of woman.

At a spring 1994 symposium at Berkeley on “Rhetorics of Early Modern Masculinity,” Patricia Parker spoke about the efforts of Renaissance authors to achieve stylistic virilitas. Their goal was a sinewy (nervosus) style, which these anti-Ciceronian rhetoricians attempted to ground in the male body
But no male could express a virile style in words whose lingua-derived copia was
gendered feminine. In the epistle dedicatory to his *A Worlde of Wordes* (1598), John Florio
commented anxiously on the emblematic proverb, “Le parole sono feminine, & i fatti sono maschi,
Words are women, and deeds are men.” Like Hamlet, Florio sensed his project for a virile
style hopelessly compromised by its imbrication and entrapment in woman's textual web. See Parker's
445-65. Here Parker demonstrates how Erasmus' *Lingua* treatise (1525) associates the loquacious
male with the “loud and babbling harlot” of *Proverbs* 7, a passage relevant to Hamlet's
self-characterization as a wordy whore. Parker discusses the way that Erasmus prefers manly brevitas
to excessive verbal copia: “The arts of rhetoric as devices for amplifying a theme (‘amplificandi
rationes’) are not only contrasted with deeds but linked to a loquacity gendered as ‘foolish and
womanish’ (‘stultam ac muliebrem loquacitatem’) (449).

My contention that the male fears being compromised and contaminated by his dependency upon the
mother's body is deeply indebted to Janet Adelman's *Suffocating Mothers: Fantasies of Maternal
argues that the feminine presence that divides Hamlet's male identity is the mother regarded as whore:
“He himself is subject to his birth: he would imagine himself the unmixed son of an unmixed father,
but the whore-mother in him betrays him, returning him to his own mixed (mixture = "sexual
intercourse" (OED 1e)) origin, his contamination by the sexual female within” (30).

I owe to Joel Altman the tenor of my remarks about the way that res and verbum reverse the gender
hierarchy of spirit over matter.

Erasmus' *Lingua* begins with a proverb that suggests that the verbose male is he who has sucked too
long at the mother's breast: “Ubi uber, ibi tuber; fatti maschii, parole femine” (“Where there is a
breast, there is a swelling; facts are masculine, words are feminine”) (460; quoted in Parker).

The son's loss of the father results in the impossible duty to restore him, to avenge the dead by
undoing the adulterous usurpation of Claudius and Gertrude.

In the closing chapter of *The Gendering of Melancholia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992),
Juliana Schiesari analyzes the male's scapegoating of woman in Hamlet, Burton's *The Anatomy of
Melancholy*, and Freud's works. “The melancholic's desire for the father's gaze is concomitant to and
inseparable from a profound denigration of women, who are typically accused of all the horrible
things the melancholic can also accuse himself of duplicity, inconstancy, inhumanity, animality, and
base materiality. Obviously, the melancholic projects on women the lack that he would deny in
himself, except of course when he addresses himself in the voice of his own superego” (239). This
observation leads to a reading of Burton that is relevant as well to my dissection of Hamlet: “In
diagnosing, as Freud too would, the female melancholic as phallicly needy, Burton blushingly
foregrounds his own sexual deprivation, his own ‘unmanliness. Much later, in discussing love
melancholia, Burton does not mince words when he says outright that melancholia ‘turns a man into a
woman (3: 142)” (252). Hamlet suffers from an inversion of love melancholy since the woman in him
makes him too disillusioned to love any woman. In “Mourning and Melancholia” (Standard Edition of
the *Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. and ed. James Strachey (London:
Hogarth Press, 1955-74), 14: 239-58), Freud instances Hamlet's melancholia, his self-reproaches and
suicidal impulses, as the turning against his own ego of a repressed hostility towards a once loved
object. The ambivalently cathected object is introjected, i.e., internalized as the ego's own object, as
opposed to the release of the object that occurs in mourning. Julia Reinhard Lupton and Kenneth
Lupton invoke Lacan's reading of Freud in arguing that whereas *Oedipus Rex* ends with the
recognition of castration, Hamlet begins with it. Hamlet is like a little girl, they assert, in recognizing
castration immediately: “Since the little girl is mourning something that was never there in the first
place, we would argue that her relation to the phallus is melancholic rather than mournful. We could
say that she mourns mourning—that is, that she mourns the lack of any real object that could be
mourned, or, more precisely, that she mourns the lack of a lack that could be restored.” *After Oedipus:
issue with “critics who use the model of Freud's ‘Mourning and Melancholia (who) generally assume that the lost object is Hamlet's father; but Hamlet's discovery of the whore inside himself suggests that the lost, introjected, and then berated object is his mother” (256-57). See also Ranjini Philip, “The Shattered Glass: The Story of (O)phelia,” Hamlet Studies 13 (1991): 73-84.

13. In “Creativity and its Origins,” D. W. Winnicott anticipates Carolyn Heilbrun (see n.3 above) in arguing that the male and female elements in Hamlet are in harmony until his father dies. Thereafter he rejects the female and projects it onto Ophelia, whom he then maligns for her femininity. Playing and Reality (New York: Routledge, 1971).

14. Avi Erlich regards the “flesh” in this speech as a representation of the “solid” penis, which Hamlet wishes poured out orgasmically “into a dew.” Hamlet's Absent Father (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), 65. Erlich's analysis is at times stretched and tendentious, but his book remains probably the most detailed compendium of psychoanalytic readings of the play.

15. See the essay by this name, S. E. II: 155-61.

16. Julia Reinhard Lupton and Kenneth Lupton comment on the identification of Hamlet with Niobe: “Niobe, becoming her tears, is a favored Renaissance figure of narcissistic identification with loss; she thus becomes an image of the melancholic petrification to which Hamlet and Hamlet are subject. Niobe's metamorphosis materializes the watery fate imagined in the soliloquy's opening line” (115).

17. At several points in The Interpretation of Dreams (S. E. 4 & 5), Freud discusses water as a dream element that symbolizes woman, especially with regard to male fantasies of birth and of returning to the womb.

18. Laertes appeals to the blood/tears opposition in defending the incorruptibility of his descent and the chastity of his mother:

That drop of blood that's calm proclaims me bastard, Cries cuckold to my father, brands me harlot Even here between the chaste unsmirched brow Of my true mother.

(4.5.116-20)

This confidence about origins contrasts with Hamlet's nagging fear that Gertrude may have cuckolded King Hamlet and so have branded her son a bastard and a harlot.

19. In a series of articles Patricia Parker has argued the centrality for Shakespearean tragedy of “dilation” in the rhetorical and temporal senses, as well as in the sense of delation or accusation. I use the word to describe how Hamlet's delay in the midst of resolution leads to self-accusation; dilation engenders delation. See especially Parker's “Shakespeare and Rhetoric: ‘Dilation and ‘Delation in Othello,” in Shakespeare and the Question of Theory, eds. Patricia Parker and Geoffrey Hartman (London: Methuen, 1985); 54-74.

20. Again the relevant foil for Hamlet is Laertes, whose deeds in defense of his slain father contrast with Hamlet's soliloquizing. Claudius rouses Laertes to action by appealing to the bad example of Hamlet: “But to the quick of th' ulcer: / Hamlet comes back; what would you undertake / To show yourself in deed your father's son / More than in words?” (4.7.122-24). The wordy son is the mother's son who can only rail ineffectually against bastardy, whereas the father's son is a man who vindicates his legitimacy in deed.

21. Even at the zero degree of etymology, some critics have construed the word “conscience” to express an irreconcilable sexual divide, since it may allude in its first syllable to the female genitalia, while its independent root designates disembodied mind. In his edition of Shakespeare's sonnets (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977), Stephen Booth glosses “conscience” in Sonnet 151 as “cunt knowledge.” “Any word with con in it appears to have invited Shakespeare and his contemporaries (see Congreve, con and noc) to play on the commonest name for the female sex organ” (526). Other critics who comment on the sexual sense of “conscience” are Erlich, Hamlet's Absent Father 188, 229-30, and Parker, “Othello and Hamlet: Dilation, Spying, and the ‘Secret Place of Woman,” 83.


23. Juliana Schiesari surveys the way that melancholy from Aristotle to Freud has been associated with male genius, whereas women have been relegated to the realm of unproductive mourning. (See especially the introductory chapter of The Gendering of Melancholia.) I argue, however, that Hamlet’s melancholy is at times figured as feminine and productive, not exclusively as feminine and debilitating.

24. Erlich is perhaps not at his credible best when he offers an analysis of the sexual oscillation in this passage in terms of erection and detumescence: “‘His golden couplets disclosed strikes me as a possible though disguised reference to ejaculation, with ‘couplets referring to Hamlet's testicles and ‘disclosed to an orgasmic bursting out. Similarly, ‘His silence will sit drooping seems a description of a post-coital penis” (Hamlet's Absent Father 176). Erlich calls ejaculation what I describe as parturition.

25. Peter Erickson contrasts the feminine side of Hamlet manifested in his soliloquies with the male element foregrounded in Hamlet's relationship with Horatio. By the end of the play it is Horatio whom Hamlet asks to perpetuate his memory, as opposed to the usual means of passing on one's legacy by linking with a woman who in turn gives birth to a male heir. Since Gertrude's conduct corrupts the ideal of motherhood, Erickson argues, Hamlet turns to the chaste, passionless Horatio instead. “In a world where love between men and women has become irrevocably duplicitous, sexuality can be avoided by turning to male ties to fashion a dependable bond.” Patriarchal Structures in Shakespeare's Drama (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 77. If Hamlet and Horatio are solumates and the anima is gendered feminine, however, this would indicate that the male-male bond does not so much escape the feminine as sublimate it by abstracting it from the body.

26. See Adelman, Suffocating Mothers (252-53) for the way that the play inscribes woman's responsibility for moral fault in her material body. “Fault” was a slang term for the female genitals, and the French foutre = “sexual intercourse” was pronounced the same way.

27. Ophelia remarked earlier upon Hamlet's “unmatch'd form and feature of blown youth / Blasted with ecstasy” (3.1.161-62). Ex-stasis defines madness as eccentricity, the alienation of the self from its rational center.


29. Coppélia Kahn, Man's Estate: Masculine Identity in Shakespeare (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1981), 135. In opposition to Kahn's view of the ear as a vaginal analogue, it is also possible to regard the murder as an act motivated by homosexual jealousy (“the primal eldest curse … A brother's murder” (3.3.37-38) with the ear as locus of anal penetration. Jonathan Goldberg critiques what he regards as Kahn's compulsory heterosexism in “Romeo and Juliet's Open Rs,” in Queering the Renaissance, ed. Jonathan Goldberg (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1994). In the same anthology, Richard Rambuss' “Pleasure and Devotion: The Body of Jesus and Seventeenth-Century Religious Lyric” cautions against the uncritical assumption, popular among heterosexist critics, that any penetrated body must be a female one, and that the site of entry is necessarily vaginal. Richard Crashaw, for example, imagines the wounds that penetrate Christ's body on the cross in homoerotic terms. In “The Death of Hamlet's Father” (Essays in Applied Psychoanalysis (London: Hograth, 1951), I, 323-28), Ernest Jones argues that the poison is semen, the ear a displaced anus, so a homosexual rape is at issue. Norman Holland sums up the debate as follows: “One need not choose between heterosexual or homosexual insemination for, in the unconscious, there is no negation. Rather, both apply; and the fact that the symbol is ambiguous suggests an ambiguity in the play's
presentation, one that reaches to an early level of infantile confusions” (194). Context must determine symbolic usage, so it may be plausible to see the ear of the original murder as a homoerotic locus, while its replay in The Murder of Gonzago foregrounds the hetero sex act as murderous-castrating. The critics' lack of consensus over anal versus vaginal interpretations may reflect the ambiguously oscillating, androgynous orientation of the text itself.

30. See Alexander Grinstein, “The Dramatic Device: A Play Within a Play,” in The Design Within: Psychoanalytic Approaches to Shakespeare, ed. M. D. Faber (New York: Science House, 1970), 147-53. Grinstein believes that the play within the play follows the same laws as Freud's analysis of the dream within a dream: it is an attempt to undo a past event.

31. In “Othello and Hamlet: Dilation, Spying, and the Secret Place of Woman,” Patricia Parker comments on these two references—“conscience” and “nothing”—to the woman in Claudius. Of the first she says that catching the King's conscience “elicits the con-, count, or euphemistic country matter lurking within this monarchical con-science and its closeted secrets” (83).

32. Central to Janet Adelman's argument is Hamlet's fantasy of Gertrude as the phantom murderer of Claudius: “The playlet is in fact designed to catch the conscience of the queen” (31).

33. This is Cavell's summary comment in Disowning Knowledge (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987): “One's belief in Gertrude's power is surely not lessened if in constructing the primal scene from the fantasy/dumb-show one finds a man collapsing not upon her pouring something into him but upon her having something poured into her (the reversal of passive into active)” (185).

34. Avi Erlich is the critic who writes most extensively about the castration of King Hamlet in the primal scene. See especially chapter four of Hamlet's Absent Father. For textual evidence of castration, one may point to King Hamlet's lament that he was “cut off even in the blossoms of my sin” (1.5.76) and his injunction to Hamlet to “Remember me” (1.5.91), which suggests that the son is called upon to restore (re-member) the father's missing phallus.

35. The “common place” is what in King Lear Edgar calls the “indistinguish'd space of woman's will” (4.6.273), where “will” refers both to volition and to the genitalia. Desdemona's fetishistic handkerchief, associated metonymically with her private parts, is said to be a “common thing” (3.3.302), and in the brothel scene Othello addresses his wife as a “public commoner” (4.2.73). Troilus's misogyny similarly points to the way that his Cressida is common to everyone because she makes her “thing” public, open to all comers.

This is, and is not, Cressid. Within my soul there doth conduce a fight Of this strange nature that a thing inseparate Divides more wider than the sky and earth.

(5.2.143-46)

Lars Eagle suggests (Shakespearean Pragmatism: Market of his Time (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 238n.) that Ophelia regards Hamlet in much the way that Troilus sees himself divided when he regards himself reflected in Cressida. Ophelia's “O woe is me / T' have seen what I have seen, see what I see” (3.1.152) might be paraphrased as “This is and is not Hamlet.” In Hamlet's eyes, he is divided because he sees Ophelia as double (duplicitous), chaste and not chaste. In A Theater of Envy (Oxford University Press, 1991), René Girard asserts that Ophelia is “contaminated with the erotic strategy of a Cressida and the other least savory Shakespearean heroines. What Hamlet resents in Ophelia is what any human being always resents in another human being, the visible signs of his own sickness” (285). Cressida and Ophelia are both objects of a misogynistic gaze that sees double when it sees woman, because it sees woman as common and therefore duplicitous. See also the discussion of “common” in Parker's Representations article.

36. To anyone familiar with his work, Joel Fineman's influence on my reading of duplicitous desire will be apparent. Fineman contrasts the giddy and playful androgyny of Shakespeare's transvestite heroines to the untransvested, unveiled duplicity of Gertrude: “Symmetrical desire, a structure of homosexual jealousy that is resolved in the comedies by apportioning out to each pair of rivals a
matching pair of beloveds, is precisely what we have unresolved in Hamlet, where, correspondingly, we might say woman herself, as woman, because her name is frailty—is the image of androgyny.”

“Fratricide and Cuckoldry: Shakespeare's Doubles,” in Representing Shakespeare, 82. Fineman argues that woman's androgyny becomes the mirror for man's difference from himself: “The dialectic of Difference and No Difference contained by the original fratricide structure is transferred by Shakespeare to another formula of mirroring reciprocity, to themes of women and their frailty, to a kind of masculine misogyny that finds in the ambiguity of woman its own self-divided self-consciousness, its own vulnerability, its mortality” (89). In Shakespeare's Perjured Eye: The Invention of Poetic Subjectivity in the Sonnets (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1986), Fineman accounts for the difference between genders as originating in the feminine: “In a formula whose lusty misogyny is recognizably Shakespearean, we can say that in Shakespeare's sonnets the difference between man and woman is woman herself” (17). In a typical Neoplatonic schema, man is figured as the sun, woman as the moon, in service of an “orthodox erotics for which woman is the Other to man, the hetero to homo, precisely because her essence is to be this lunatic difference between sameness and difference” (120).

37. King Lear makes explicit the way that sex and death coalesce in woman's vaginal hell: “But to the girdle do the gods inherit, / Beneath is all the fiend's. / There's hell, there's darkness, there is the sulphurous pit; burning, scalding, stench, consumption” (4.6.125-28).


39. Much of my meditation on Lamord is indebted to Ferguson, “Hamlet: Letters and Spirits,” 298-304. As an especially apt instance of the “Lamord” wordplay, Ferguson quotes the epigraph to chapter 15 of Stendhal's Le Rouge et le Noir:

Amour en latin facit amor; Or donc provient d'amour la mort, Et par avant, soulcy qui mord, Deuils, plours, pieges, forfaitz, remords.

40. Valerie Traub argues that the only certifiably chaste woman is a dead woman. In life Ophelia is suspect because she is mobile and open, whereas in death her closure and immobility secure her chastity, thus making her available for the first time as an object worthy of Hamlet's romantic love (25-33). This conception of a safely enclosed because dead Ophelia is at odds with Patricia Parker's analysis in her Representations article. “In contrast to the natural modesty of women reported in Pliny and repeated in Crooke, Ophelia, in the melodious lay (4.7.182-83) of her drowning, floats more openly, face up, her clothes spread wide (175) in lines the ear may hear, given other such Shakespearean instances, as the spreading wide of her close” (75). Parker glosses “spread” as “open for copulation.” Traub completely ignores the pronounced sexual innuendo of Ophelia's death song: maids who open their “chamber doors” in losing their virginity (4.5.53), and the many phallic references to young men who “do't if they come to't—/ By Cock, they are to blame” (60-61), to “sweet Robin” (4.5.184), and to the death garlands of “long purples” or “dead men's fingers” (4.7.168-71). In dyeing Ophelia is foul (phallic)-mouthed, thus anything but closed-mouthed. For the chaste as dead woman, see also Carol Thomas Neely, Broken Nuptials in Shakespeare's Plays (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985). Peter Stallybrass gives a brilliant reading of open versus closed women's bodies in “Patriarchal Territories: The Body Enclosed,” in Rewriting the Renaissance, eds. Margaret Ferguson, Maureen Quilligan, and Nancy Vickers (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986): 123-42.

41. It is a measure of Laertes's ingenuous fatuity that he forgets his two earlier conversations in which violets are associated with the fading of love and death (1.3.5-10, 4.5.180-83). In this quotation from act 5 as well as in Shakespeare's Ovidian Poetry, the purpled violet may suggest graphically and etymologically love's wound as consequence of phallic violation (violets/violence).

42. Rhetorically, the elegiac cast that Gertrude gives to the shadowing of love by death corresponds to the isocolonic and oxymoronic formalism of Claudius, which also yokes contraries together in order to
repress their contariety:

Therefore our sometimes sister, now our queen, Th'imperial jointress to this warlike
state, Have we, as 'twere with a defeated joy, With an auspicious and a dropping eye,
With mirth in funeral and with dirge in marriage, In equal scale weighing delight and
dole, Taken to wife.

(1.2.8-14)

This facile reconciliation of opposites via juxtaposition, this specious balancing of equal and
homologous units (isocolon), is the object of Hamlet's critique, whose preferred rhetorical mode
employs paronomasia to subvert and satirize isocolon. Of course Hamlet wants his own set of tidy
moral contraries, provided that they not be reconciled. For discussion of Claudius's use of isocolon,

43. James Calderwood discusses “union” in terms of the frequent “hyphenisation of relations that leads to
the total undifferentiation” in phrases like “uncle-father” and “aunt-mother” (2.2.372), and in
Hamlet's confusing address of his (step)father as his ‘mother.’ “All such repellent, hyphenised unions
flow poisonously into the cup from which Gertrude drinks in the final scene and which Hamlet forces
upon the already dying Claudius with the words, ‘Drink off this poison. Is thy union here?’ (5.2.331).
Hamlet's killing of Claudius is, in this context, an act of restorative destruction, an undoing of unions
that came into existence not through the linking of like to like but through the disintegration of proper
differences.” To Be and Not To Be: Negation and Metadrama in “Hamlet” (New York: Columbia
University Press, 1983), 63. This returns me to my earlier invocation of René Girard's notion that the
only way Hamlet can establish his difference from the feminine (the hymenated hyphenization) is by
means of effecting masculine violence.

44. Steven Mullaney argues that because the playhouses were set in the marginal Liberties of London, the
drama was able to arrogate to itself the license of having common men impersonate kings. Defenses
of hierarchical degree, like Ulysses's famous speech in Troilus and Cressida, were evacuated by
virtue of their parodic-representational frame; hence, difference was made common. The Place of the
Stage: License, Play, and Power in Renaissance England (Chicago: University of Chicago Press,
1988), esp. 51-52.

45. Francis Barker comments that this line “is extraordinary (if it is so at all) for its insistence on the
democracy of mortality in contrast with the hierarchized body politic of the living world, not for the
corporeal expression in which the idea emerges.” The Tremulous Private Body (London: Methuen,
1984), 23.

46. Lalita Pandit points out that in the Saxo Grammaticus tale, when Amleth is questioned regarding the
whereabouts of the eavesdropper (the unnamed Polonius figure) whom he has killed, he replies that
“the man had gone to the sewer, but had fallen through its bottom and been stifled by the floods of
filth, and that he had been devoured by the swine that came up all about the place.” In Shakespeare's
play Hamlet responds to Claudius's inquiry about where Polonius is by saying, “At supper. … Not
where he eats, but where a is eaten” (4.3.17, 19). The homology of “supper” and “sewer,” of eating
and defecating, suggests a cannibalistic relationship between master and source texts as well as
between living and dead bodies. “Language and the Textual Unconscious: Shakespeare, Ovid, and
Saxo Grammaticus,” in Criticism and Lacan, eds. Patrick Colm Hogan and Lalita Pandit (Athens:
University of Georgia Press, 1990): 248-67 (264). The corpse of Alexander may be food for worms
but also fecal dust used to stop a “bung-hole” (= anus, OED 6) (4.1.198).

47. In Psychoanalysis and Shakespeare, Norman Holland writes: “The finale, in which Hamlet and his
mother die together, projects the wish to die with the mother, to return to her womb in a sexual way”
(167). A counterpoint to the union of mother and son that death effects results when Gertrude drinks
the poisoned union wine: she gives the lie to the union that her imperial jointure posited, since her
death uncovers the differential severing that any jointure presupposes, the separation by death (of/from one's betrayed spouse) that jointure aims to repress.

48. In *Suffocating Mothers*, Janet Adelman points out that union is just another version of Hecate's “mixture rank” (3.2.251), the poison that kills Hamlet's father: “Each is the poisonous epitome of sexual mixture itself and hence of boundary danger, the terrifying adulteration of male by female that does away with the boundaries between them” (28).

My epigraphs from this ambivalently androgynous actress are gleaned respectively from M. Maurice Shudofsky, “Sarah Bernhardt on Hamlet,” *College English* 3 (1941): 293-95, and Marjorie Garber, *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 38. In *The Masks of Hamlet* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1992), 105-6, Marvin Rosenberg offers a cento of original reviews of Bernhardt's 1899 performance, from which it appears that the ambivalent critics were roughly evenly divided on the issue of whether her Hamlet tended more (or too much) towards the masculine or the feminine. Marcel Pagnol suggested that since Hamlet “does not have the reflexes of a man,” perhaps his theatrical role better suits a woman: “Hamlet is for me, without any doubt, a philosophe d'un sexe douteux whose role could be perfectly played by a great comedienne.” (Quoted in Norman Holland, *Psychoanalysis and Shakespeare* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1979), 183.).

**Criticism: Themes: Eric Levy (essay date winter 2001)**


*In the following essay, Levy investigates the conflict between reason and emotion in Hamlet, demonstrating the ways in which the play explores not only the importance of rational control of emotion, but also the role of reason in generating emotion. Levy also comments on the relevance of Christian-humanist doctrine to the play's treatment of the relationship between reason and emotion.*

*Hamlet* opens on a state of incipient alarum, with martial vigilance on the battlemented “platform” (act 1, scene 2, line 252) of Elsinore and conspicuous “post-haste and rummage in the land” (1.1.110). For the sentries, this apprehension is heightened by the entrances of the Ghost—a figure whom Horatio eventually associates with a threat to the “sovereignty of reason” (1.4.73). In the immediate context, loss of the “sovereignty of reason” entails “madness” (1.4.74). In turn, madness is here associated with the disastrous inability to control emotional impulse (exemplified in this instance as either terror induced by the Ghost's monstrous metamorphosis at “the summit of the cliff” 1.4.70 or “desperation” 1.4.75 provoked by looking “so many fathoms to the sea” 1.4.77). Thus, as formulated on the platform, the fundamental danger posed to reason in the world of the play is that it might lose sovereignty over emotion.

The concept of the sovereignty of reason over emotion derives from the classical definition, adopted by medieval Scholasticism, of man as the rational animal whose reason has the ethical task of rationally ordering the passions or emotional disturbances of what is formally termed the sensitive appetite (referred to by the Ghost as “nature” 1.5.12) with which man, like all other animals, is endowed: “All the passions of the soul should be regulated according to the rule of reason …” (Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* I-II, question 39, answer 2, ad 1). Hamlet concurs, when praising Horatio “whose blood and judgment are so well commedled” (3.2.69): “Give me that man / That is not passion's slave …” (3.2.71-72). Moreover, on other occasions Hamlet also emphasizes the need to control passion. For example, he censures both Gertrude and Claudius for improper surrender to the passions of concupiscence. He faults the Queen for allowing her “judgment” (3.4.70) to succumb to “compulsive ardour” (3.4.86). Through reference to “the bloat King” (3.4.184), Hamlet censures Claudius' gluttony. Through the epithet, “bawdy villain” (2.2.576), Hamlet deplores the King's lust. Indeed, Hamlet censures himself for succumbing, in the graveyard, to the irascible passion of anger: “But sure
the bravery of his grief did put me / Into a tow'ring passion” (5.2.78-79). Ironically, in reacting to Laertes’ excessive display of grief, Hamlet confronts a passion or emotion with which, through his own melancholy, he himself has been intimately associated, and whose influence on reason he recognizes, as when speculating whether the Ghost is “the devil” (2.2.595): “… and perhaps, / Out of my weakness and my melancholy, / As he is very potent with such spirits, / Abuses me to damn me” (2.2.596-99).

The emphasis in *Hamlet* on the control or moderation of emotion by reason is so insistent that many critics have addressed it. A seminal study is undertaken by Lily Bess Campbell in *Shakespeare’s Tragic Heroes, Slaves of Passion*. John S. Wilks, in a masterful examination of conscience, explores “the subsidence in *Hamlet* of virulent passion,” and notes “his accession to a renewed temperance” achieved through “chastened self-control” (139, 140). Very recently, a third critic, Jennifer Low, explains Hamlet's delay in terms of a conflict between “the role of the avenger” and the “restraint and … reverence for the godhead in man” urged by Hamlet's “valorization” of reason in the “‘What a piece of work is man speech” (502). It should be noted, however, that Low's claim regarding the conflict between reason and revenge is contradicted by Aquinas: “Wherefore if one desire revenge to be taken in accordance with the order of reason, the desire of anger is praiseworthy, and is called zealous anger (Summa Theologica II-II, question 158, answer 2, response; original emphasis). In fact, as Aquinas notes, the notion of zealous revenge entails the law of retribution (lex talonis) sanctioned in the Old Testament: “Retaliation (contrapassum) denotes equal passion repaid for previous action; and the expression applies most properly to injurious passions and actions, whereby a man harms the person of his neighbour; for instance if a man strike, that he be struck back. This kind of justice is laid down in the Law Exodus 21.23,24: ‘He shall render life for life, eye for eye …’” (II-II, q. 61, a. 4, resp.).

Ironically, Low's error in pitting revenge against reason highlights the role of reason not in controlling, but in determining emotion. For the distinction between zealous or destructive anger presupposes the operation of reason in judging the object which the emotion of anger here concerns. As we shall find, though *Hamlet* is filled with references to the need for rational control of emotion, the play probes much deeper into the relation between reason and emotion—particularly with respect to the role of reason in provoking as opposed to controlling emotion. The result of this probing is at once a confounding and deepening of relevant Christian-humanist doctrine. Our investigation of these matters will entail both a recapitulation of that doctrine and an examination of the ways in which the play problematizes and supersedes it. But we can ease our entry into that demanding inquiry by first noting how the task of controlling emotion by reason is more obviously problematized by Hamlet and other characters in the play.

Though Hamlet is linked with the vulnerability of reason to emotion, he nevertheless displays extraordinary emotional control, despite extreme provocation. This is evident, for example, when Hamlet toys nonchalantly with Polonius about the shape of “yonder cloud” (3.2.368), during the hectic interval between exposing the clumsy attempts of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to probe Hamlet's “mystery” (3.2.357) and obeying the summons of his mother to her closet. Indeed, in an aside just before Polonius' exit, Hamlet privately expresses his well mastered consternation: “They fool me to the top of my bent” (3.2.375). The susceptibility of Hamlet's reason to emotion is further problematized by his delay, which he himself construes in terms of a failure to react appropriately to “excitements of my reason and my blood” (4.4.58). In an earlier soliloquy, he diagnoses his lack of response as a deficiency in the humour responsible for generating, as Jenkins explains, “bitter and rancorous feelings”: “But I am pigeon-liver'd and lack gall” (2.2.573; Jenkins' note for 2.2.573-74).

We reach now a central paradox in Hamlet's character. On the one hand, he allows emotion to provoke him to unthinkingly violent action, as when stabbing blindly at the figure hidden behind the arras or grappling with Laertes. But on the other hand, Hamlet so little trusts emotion to prod him to action that he even invokes the opposite tactic of exploiting thought as a goad of emotion: “My thoughts be bloody or be nothing worth” (4.4.66). Here blood and judgment are to be commedled not, as in Horatio's case, by the rational control of emotion, but by the rational arousal of emotion. Instead of disciplining emotion, here the function of thought is to excite emotion so that irrational violence results.
Moreover, in *Hamlet*, the moral requirement to control emotion by reason is undermined in other contexts, with the result that the relation between thought and emotion is radically problematized. One undermining context concerns the deliberately exaggerated display of emotion demanded by the “terms of honour” (5.2.242), dominant in the world of the play. In this context, to be worthy is to indulge in the conspicuous expression of emotion, “when honour's at the stake” (4.4.56). Indeed, as he admires the Player's emotionally charged recitation, Hamlet berates himself for not similarly responding to “the motive and the cue for passion” (2.2.555), with respect to the circumstances of his father's death: “Yet I, A dull and muddy-mettled rascal, peak / Like John-a-dreams, unpregnant of my cause” (2.2.561-62). Yet, the obligation to display emotion to which Hamlet here refers ironically requires intense rational control by which the character in question can convincingly “force his soul to his own conceit” (2.2.546), for the sake of the approval his or her performance evokes. Here the notion of rational control of emotion is reinterpreted—one might almost say parodied—to entail not the ordering or limiting of emotion, as enjoined by Christian-humanism, but the deliberately exaggerated enactment of emotion.3

Another context in which the control of emotion by reason is ironized concerns Claudius' response to Hamlet. Just as, for Aquinas, unchecked passions are called “diseases or disturbances of the soul” (I-II, q. 24, a. 2, resp.), so for Claudius fear of Hamlet is an emotional disease from which he seeks to purge himself: “Diseases desperate grown / By desperate appliance are reliev'd, / Or not at all” (4.3.9-11). But whereas, in the Aristotelian-Thomist synthesis, the cure for unchecked passion is the restraining influence of reason, for Claudius the cure for unchecked passion (in this case, fear) is not restraint, but indulgence. That is, succumbing utterly to an unchecked emotion (in this case, fear) provokes Claudius to devise, with his reason, a desperate stratagem by which, through violence, to eliminate his uncontrollable feeling: “The present death of Hamlet. Do it, England; / For like the hectic in my blood he rages, / And thou must cure me” (4.3.68-70). Thus, through the use of reason, Claudius seeks to restore the proper commeddling of blood and judgment, but at the cost of enabling the unchecked “hectic” in his blood to compel his reason to concoct “desperate appliance.” Here thought is directed by feeling, and devises a means of escape from insistent emotional pain.

Recourse to “desperate appliance,” where thought conceives emergency measures to relieve emotional distress, recurs in the world of the play. Examples include first, the tentative suicide project in the “To be” soliloquy, designed to escape “heart-ache” (3.1.62), and second, the momentary despair which prompts Horatio to grab the poison'd cup: “Here's yet some liquor left” (5.2.347). Paradoxically, in these instances, by thinking about emotional pain, thought risks losing its rationality by succumbing entirely to the inciting influence of the emotional pain concerned. The ultimate example of this predicament is Ophelia whose thought, in madness, is no more than the confused cognition of emotional distress: “nothing sure, yet much unhappily” (4.5.13).

Our investigation of the ways in which the role of reason in controlling emotion is problematized in the world of the play can now proceed to direct consideration of relevant Aristotelian-Thomist doctrine. Our purpose here is first to acquire and then to apply a set of concepts which, like lenses, will allow important ideas to stand out clearly from the text so that they can be effectively analyzed.

In the Aristotelian-Thomist paradigm, each entity or existent tends toward an end or purpose: “Every agent, of necessity, acts for an end” (I-II, q. 1, a. 2, resp.). This tending toward an end is called inclination, and it follows the nature of the being concerned. In beings with no power of apprehension or perception, inclination is governed by inherent form. Aquinas elucidates: “some inclination follows every form; for example, fire, by its form, is inclined to rise, and to generate its like” (I, q. 80, a. 1, resp.). In beings with apprehensive powers, inclination presupposes both an apprehensive or knowing power and a corresponding appetitive power or faculty of desire. In animals, the apprehensive power involves sense perception (what Aquinas terms sensitive apprehension) and the corresponding appetitive or desiring power is called the sensitive appetite, “through which the animal is able to desire what it apprehends, and not only that to which it is inclined by its natural form” (I, q. 80, a. 1, resp.; I, q. 80, a. 1, resp.). In man, the apprehensive power is reason, and the
corresponding appetitive power is the will or intellectual appetite. Aquinas summarizes these distinctions compactly: “in the intellectual nature there is to be found a natural inclination coming from the will; in the sensitive nature, according to the sensitive appetite; but in a nature devoid of knowledge, only according to the tendency of the nature to something” (I, q. 60, a. 1, resp.).

Hence, in the Aristotelian-Thomist paradigm, appetite (whether sensitive or intellectual) is moved by some mode of apprehension: “The movement of the appetitive power follows an act of the apprehensive power” (I-II, q. 46, a. 2, resp.). That is, inclination or appetitive movement toward an end presupposes prior awareness (whether through sense perception or thought) of the end to be approached. This point is crucial to understanding the relation between reason and emotion. For as we shall now clarify, in the Aristotelian-Thomist paradigm the task of reason to control emotion is complicated by its role in provoking emotion.

We take the first step toward understanding this dual role of reason with respect to emotion by noting that emotion or passion is here defined as a movement of the sensitive appetite: “Passion is a movement of the sensitive appetite when we imagine good or evil; in other words, passion is a movement of the irrational soul, when we think of good or evil” (Aquinas quoting Damascene in Summa Theologica I-II, q. 22, a. 3, resp.). Thus construed as a movement of the sensitive appetite respectively toward or away from “whatever is suitable” (Aquinas' generic definition of good) or “whatever is repugnant” (Aquinas' generic definition of evil), emotion entails an appetitive response which, to interpolate Gilson's masterful phrasing, itself presupposes the apprehension “of an object which is of interest to the life of the body” (I-II, q. 29, a. 1, resp.; Gilson, Christian Philosophy 272).

In the case of animals other than man, this apprehension of the appetitive object entails such faculties as sense perception and estimation (a power of rudimentary judgment). But in man, the rational animal, the will (or intellectual appetite), as a higher power, can choose whether to yield to the passionate impulses of the sensitive appetite. Aquinas' famous example of the sheep and the wolf will illustrate:

For in other animals movement follows at once the concupiscible and irascible appetites the two aspects of the sensitive appetite; for instance, the sheep, fearing the wolf, flies at once, because it has no superior counteracting appetite. On the contrary, man is not moved at once, according to the irascible and concupiscible appetites, but he awaits the command of the will, which is the superior appetite and which is itself moved by reason. (I, q. 81, a. 3, resp.).

But in the Aristotelian-Thomist paradigm, reason not only controls emotion but also provokes it. The role of reason in provoking emotion appears most clearly in the Aristotelian-Thomist notion of sorrow, a passion which Aquinas generically defines as “pain … which is caused by an interior apprehension” or act of mental awareness (I-II, q. 35, a. 2, resp.). Aquinas distinguished two kinds of pain—outward and inward. The first is sensory; the second (which causes sorrow) is mental: “outward pain arises from an apprehension of sense, and especially of touch, while inward pain arises from an interior apprehension, of the imagination or of the reason” (I-II, q. 35, a. 7, resp.). Since outward pain is apprehended by the senses (a faculty which all animals possess), while inward pain is perceived by the mind (the distinguishing attribute of man), inward pain is more intense than outward: “inward pain surpasses outward pain … because the apprehension of reason and imagination is of a higher order than the apprehension of the sense of touch” (I-II, q. 35, a. 7, resp.). That is, the greater intensity of inward pain, in comparison with outward pain, results from the fact that, unlike outward pain, inward pain is not a sensory, but a mental event. Construed as a feeling, inward pain is registered in the heart: “And I am sick at heart” (1.1.9). But it is equally appropriate to locate inward pain “in
the mind” (3.1.57); for without thought (i.e. the operation of reason or imagination), there is no inward pain. In *Hamlet*, thought or interior apprehension not only engenders inward pain (as postulated in the Aristotelian-Thomist system), but tends also as we have seen, to brood on the need to terminate that pain. Indeed, in referring to Hamlet's inward pain. Claudius foregrounds precisely such preoccupation: “This something settled matter in his heart, / Whereon his brains still beating puts him thus / From fashion of himself” (3.1. 175-77, …). Yet, in this example, unlike the “To be” soliloquy, Claudius' plot to kill Hamlet, or Horatio's snatching of the poisoned cup, the implied means of escaping inward pain entails not desperately conceived action (“desperate appliance”) but eventual understanding, through sustained mental effort (“his brains still beating”), of the pain felt. A similar emphasis on the need to understand inward pain appears in Hamlet's allusion to his melancholy: “I have of late, but wherefore I know not, lost all my mirth …” (2.2.295-96). In contrast to the Aristotelian-Thomist dispensation where inward pain results from thought. Hamlet's inward pain provokes him to focus his thought on understanding inward pain in order to eliminate it. But ironically, insofar as inward pain, by definition, derives from thought, the only way to eliminate the pain is to recognize and consequently change the mode of thinking which causes it. That is, to understand inward pain is to understand how thought contributes to it.

There are several instances in the play which concern the recognition and suggested modification of a mode of thought causing inward pain. The first involves the advice, proffered by Claudius, that Hamlet recognize that his “unmanly grief” (1.2.94) derives from “a mind impatient. / An understanding simple and unschool'd” (1.2.97), regarding the inevitability of death. The second instance occurs in Hamlet's second soliloquy, when he eliminates inward pain derived from thought by suddenly noting and then abandoning the mode of thought engendering the pain. Here Hamlet abruptly interrupts a humiliating train of thought alleging his own cowardice in not dispatching the loathed Claudius:

> This is most brave. That I … Must like a whore unpack my heart with words And fall a-cursing like a very drab. A scullion! Fie upon't! Foh! About, my brains,

(2.2.578-84).

A third instance occurs in Gertrude's closet, when the Ghost commands Hamlet to distract Gertrude from the “amazement” (3.4.112) of seeing her son discourse to the vacant air: “Conceit in weakest bodies strongest works” (3.4.113-14). A fourth instance of the recognition and subsequent modification of thought causing inward pain concerns Hamlet's misgiving prior to duelling with Laertes. After dismissing his feeling as “a kind of gaingiving as would perhaps trouble a woman” (5.2.211-12), he dispels the emotion altogether by thinking of the encompassing design of “providence” (5.2.215).

The implications of the relation between inward pain and thought can be deepened by reference to the “To be” soliloquy. The great irony of that speech concerns “the pale cast of thought” (3.1.85). Hamlet castigates thought for inhibiting the implementation of an enterprise (suicide) designed to eliminate inward pain. But as the examples just cited suggest, the proper means of allaying inward pain is not recourse to “desperate appliance” (Claudius' term), conceived by thought under the influence of emotional pain, but modification of the mode of thought creating that pain. Further consideration of the “To be” soliloquy will clarify this point. For according to the “argument” (3.2.227) there presented, “to be” involves inevitable and varied modes of “heart-ache” (3.1.62) which problematize the value of life, and make death seem more appealing. In this context, to restore value to life—to make life worth living for its own sake, and not merely for the sake of avoiding the ills in death “we know not of” (3.1.81)—is to adopt a mode of thought which does not maximize inward pain.

A further problem arises with respect to preoccupation with inward pain. In the Aristotelian-Thomist synthesis, inward pain seeks relief through outward expression; for without such release, inward pain
Tears and groans naturally assuage sorrow … because a hurtful thing hurts yet more if we keep it shut up, because the soul is more intent on it; but if it be allowed to escape, the soul's intention is dispersed as it were on outward things, so that the inward sorrow is lessened. This is why when men, burdened with sorrow, make outward show of their sorrow, by tears or groans or even by words, their sorrow is assuaged.

(I-II, q. 38, a. 2, resp., …).

But recourse to outward expression for the relief of inward pain can subject its audience to tremendous strain and can moreover, if sufficiently forceful, become inflammatory. A relevant example concerns the emotional upheaval provoked by the deliberately exaggerated display of emotion demanded by the theatrical imperative dominant, as earlier noted, in the world of the play: “Make mad the guilty and appal the free, / Confound the ignorant, and amaze indeed / The very faculties of eyes and ears” (2.2.558-60). Another example concerns Hamlet's false madness. Through it, he gives unrestrained vent to inward pain regarding moral corruption, regardless of the shattering effect of his words on his auditors. Indeed, Ophelia becomes the primary victim of such onslaught: “O woe is me / T'have seen what I have seen, see what I see” (3.1.162-63). This circumstance gives deeper meaning to Claudius' alarm regarding Hamlet: “Hazard so near us as doth hourly grow / Out of his brows” (3.3.6-7). On the level now under consideration, the thinking process which appears to “grow out of Hamlet's brows” does constitute a hazard. For the inward pain produced by this thought demands outward expression which, in turn, threatens its witnesses (such as the impressionable Ophelia) with emotional devastation.

Yet, Hamlet's thinking process also has positive implications. For through it, on many occasions, he moves beyond the mode of thought causing inward pain. The most remarkable expression of positive development in Hamlet's thinking concerns his frequent association with a higher power of intellection than that which mere thinking can achieve. For example, on hearing from the Ghost the secret of Claudius' crime, Hamlet responds: “O my prophetic soul” (1.5.41). Later, when Claudius hints of “purposes” of which Hamlet is ignorant, Hamlet responds: “I see a cherub that sees them” (4.3.50, 51). This situation implies the inverse of the Freudian notion of the unconscious. For here the crucial level of mental activity operates, not beneath conscious awareness, but above it. In other words, Hamlet's cognitive activity recalls what the Augustinian epistemological tradition (continued in High Scholasticism by St. Bonaventure) calls illumination, wherein a higher power of rationality informs or illumines a lower one, enabling it to know that which is beyond its proper power of intellection.

The relevant point for us here is not that the play dramatizes the Augustinian notion of illumination, but that Hamlet himself is repeatedly associated with mental awareness that exceeds his own unaided cognitive powers. Indeed, Hamlet himself associates the Ghost with the provoking of “thoughts beyond the reaches of our souls” (1.4.56). The ultimate consequence of this aptitude to transcend the limitations of unaided thought concerns Hamlet's release from emotions caused by uncertainty regarding the future.

Discussion of this topic must begin with further consideration of Aristotelian-Thomist doctrine. According to Aquinas, inward pain which is caused by the apprehension of an unforeseeable evil or source of harm is called anxiety: “because they cannot be foreseen … future misfortunes are feared, and fear of this kind is called anxiety” (I-II, q. 42, a. 4, resp.). Another name for this type of inward pain is perplexity: “anxiety which weighs on the mind, so as to make escape seem impossible … is also called perplexity” (I-II, q. 35, a. 8, resp.). The first scene of Hamlet dramatizes a world charged with precisely this kind of anxiety or perplexity, with respect to “the omen coming on” (1.1.126). Here, which is unforeseeable pertains to “future misfortunes” (to requote Aquinas' term), which are independent of the mind, and can be neither anticipated nor deflected by it. But the most celebrated expression in the play of anxiety or perplexity regarding the
inability to escape future misfortunes is the “To be” soliloquy, which concerns the inward pain caused by apprehending the inevitability of “outrageous fortune” (3.1.58). In that soliloquy, anxiety or perplexity (in the Thomist sense of these terms) regarding future misfortunes in life is compounded by anxiety or perplexity regarding future misfortunes in death: “For in sleep of death what dreams may come” (3.1.66).

Yet Hamlet moves toward a way of thinking which deals differently with unforeseen circumstance. Whereas in the “To be” soliloquy the apprehension of unforeseen circumstance is the cause of anxiety, Hamlet later in the play makes awareness of unforeseen circumstance a cause of emotional delectation, as when relishing the challenge of outwitting a cunningly unpredictable adversary: “O. 'tis most sweet / When in one line two crafts directly meet” (3.4.211-12). Moreover, when Hamlet accepts the challenge to duel against Laertes, awareness of unforeseen circumstance affords Hamlet emotional peace (“Let be” 5.2.220), after a brief registration of anxiety or “gaingiving” (5.2.211), as we have seen.

The process we have just analyzed, whereby one emotional state is converted into its contrary (here, anxiety converted into peace) is crucial in the development of Hamlet. Indeed, such transformation is perhaps the most profound result of the intense thinking process that “doth hourly grow / Out of his brows” (3.3.6-7). In this context, the proper relation between reason and emotion depends not only on the rational control of emotion by reason, as in the Aristotelian-Thomist synthesis, but also on the conversion of negative emotion (inward pain) by altering or overcoming the way of thinking causing it.

In the Aristotelian-Thomist synthesis, the dominant principle regarding the proper relation of emotion to reason is moderation or the disposition to choose the mean between contrary extremes or excesses: “virtue must have the quality of aiming at the intermediate” (Aristotle 14-15). Hence, according to Aristotle, “the appetitive element in the temperate man should harmonize with the rational principle …” (Aristotle 15-16). Aquinas concurs: “it pertains to the perfection of man's good that his passions be moderated by reason (I-II, q. 24, a. 3, resp.). Hamlet endorses this doctrine, as when he exhorts Gertrude to curb her lustful passion for Claudius (“Refrain tonight” 3.4.167) or when he commends Horatio's ability to commedle “blood and judgment” (3.2.69). In fact, in referring elsewhere to Claudius' incontinence, Hamlet even seems (though this cannot be proven) to allude to a passage from the Nichomachean Ethics: “When he is drunk asleep, or in his rage” (3.3.89, …). For here the words, “drunk asleep” echo those with which Aristotle designates the incontinent man who, by acting without reference to reason, is “like the man who is asleep or drunk” (14, 15).

But, as we have seen, with respect to Hamlet himself continence is ultimately associated with the role of reason not in moderating emotion (as Aristotle emphasizes), but in transforming it. This distinction is epitomized by the contrast between Horatio and Hamlet—in one, reason and emotion “are so well commedled” (3.2.69): in the other, reason transforms emotion through altering the “pale cast of thought” which provokes it. The Aristotelian-Thomist notion that, as Dadlez puts it, “cognitions are necessary constituents of emotion” upholds this process of transformation in the play (17).

Perhaps the most spectacular instance in the play of thought provoking emotion concerns Hamlet's stratagem to “catch the conscience of the King” (2.2.601) through performance of a drama which duplicates the crime of which the Ghost has accused him. In Thomistic doctrine, conscience is construed as “nothing else than the application of knowledge to some action,” and as such can provoke powerful emotion, such as remorse (I-II, q. 19, a. 6, resp.). Claudius' reaction after watching a truncated performance of The Murder of Gonzago is a case in point: “O, my offense is rank, it smells to heaven” (3.3.36).

Unwittingly, Hamlet suggests another interpretation of conscience that goes beyond the Thomistic notion of right application of knowledge to some action: “there is nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it so” (2.2.249-50, …). In the immediate context, Hamlet appears here to dismiss the notion of intrinsic moral value in favor of a moral relativism wherein the distinction between good and evil derives solely from the particular perspective of the agent in question. But in the context of the Aristotelian-Thomist doctrine regarding the role
of reason in provoking emotion. Hamlet's remark gains deeper implications. For insofar as thinking does
determine “good or bad,” it also provokes emotion since, in the Aristotelian-Thomist synthesis, good and evil
are themselves defined in terms of the appetitive response which their apprehension or cognition provokes:
“For the apprehension of the good gives rise to one kind of movement in the appetite, while the apprehension
of evil gives rise to another …” (II-II. q. 158, a. 2, resp.). Here, by distinguishing between “good or bad,”
“thinking” moves the appetite, and movement of the appetite is precisely that in which emotion, as defined in
the Aristotelian-Thomist synthesis, consists: “Passion is a movement of the sensitive appetite when we
imagine good or evil; in other words, passion is a movement of the irrational soul, when we think of good or
evil” (Aquinas quoting Damascene in a passage which we quoted earlier).

Insofar as thinking moves the appetite and thus provokes emotion, it is crucial that thinking itself be properly
ordered. The highest task of conscience in Hamlet concerns the moral evaluation not only of the objects of
thought or apprehension, but also of the act of thinking about those objects. Indeed, Hamlet foregrounds this
problem when criticizing his own thinking about revenge: “Now whether it be / Bestial oblivion, or some
craven scruple / Of thinking too precisely on th'event” (4.4.39-40). Thus, the relation between reason and
emotion in the play cannot here be summed up in the Thomistic dictum, quoted earlier, that “all the passions
of the soul should be regulated according to the rule of reason …” (I-II, q. 39, a. 2, ad 1) There remains the
responsibility of thought to recognize the emotional consequences of its own activity.

Notes

1. *Hamlet*, ed. Harold Jenkins. All quotations from *Hamlet* pertain to this edition, and will be indicated
parenthetically in the text.
from *The Summa Theologica* pertain to this edition, and will be indicated parenthetically in the text.
3. For further discussion of the theatrical imperative in *Hamlet*, see Eric P. Levy, “Nor th'exterior nor the
4. A modern reformulation of this Christian-humanist tenet is provided by Nathaniel Lawrence and
Daniel O’Connor eds., in *Readings in Existential Phenomenology*: “Feelings may be said to be that
aspect of consciousness which most proximately draws our attention to our bodiliness …” (14)

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Hamlet (Vol. 71): Further Reading

CRITICISM


Demonstrates that although Hamlet professes to be disgusted by duplicity and hypocrisy, he excels at deceiving others throughout the play. Cohen concludes that Hamlet's participation in deceit reveals that the play uncovers more moral problems than it resolves.


Book-length study of Hamlet as a poetic drama. Elliott contends that the play's meaning is revealed through its structure and sequence, and thus adopts a scene-by-scene analysis.


Examines the possibility that Hamlet should be viewed as a Christian tragedy, and explores the characterization of Hamlet and his delay.


Investigates several problems related to the character of Fortinbras, including: questions pertaining to Fortinbras's name and his claim to Denmark's throne; the issue of Fortinbras's nature and role in the play, including his role as a foil and his significance in the play's resolution; and the play's stage history, including the casting and cutting of Fortinbras's character.


Examines several unorthodox productions of Hamlet, including productions that are narrowly focused on various aspects of the play, rather than productions of the play as a whole.
Hamlet (Vol. 82): Introduction

Hamlet

In addition to being his most popular tragedy, Hamlet (c. 1600) is Shakespeare's most frequently analyzed play. In fact, critics have noted that Hamlet has inspired more critical writing than any other work of Western literature. The play recounts the murder of a Danish king, apparently at the hands of his brother, and the subsequent emotional turmoil that his son, Prince Hamlet, undergoes as he struggles with the idea of vengeance. Critical opinion about the central characters in the play—for example, Polonius, and even Hamlet—has evolved over the centuries, while scholars have continued to examine the play's poetic and rhetorical devices, and its treatment of the themes of politics, power, and friendship. Commentators are also interested in the connection between the plot of Hamlet and contemporary changes in Renaissance England as it prepared to enter the early modern era under the rule of an aging queen.

Although character studies of Hamlet have been popular since the play's inception, critics have shown renewed interest in the personalities of several characters in the play, reinterpreting many of them. Catharine


Study of the play as representative of the Mannerist style, in which Shakespeare employed techniques similar to those used by Mannerist painters of the sixteenth century.

Norford, Don Parry. “‘Very Like a Whale’: The Problem of Knowledge in Hamlet.” ELH 46, no. 4 (winter 1979): 559-76.

Examines the eye and ear as organs of knowledge in the play, demonstrating that Shakespeare appeared to be using a phenomenological approach to the issue.


Uses the character of Hamlet and the philosophical problems he considers as a means of exploring Shakespeare's philosophical views.


Examines the religious and biblical bases for Hamlet's charge of incest against his uncle and mother, and demonstrates that incest in Hamlet is not only a specific offense but is also symbolic of both religious and political corruption in general.


Analyzes several film versions of Hamlet that focus on Hamlet's sexual aberrations or perversions.


Attempts to better understand the role of reason in Hamlet by studying the various ways Shakespeare used the word “reason” in the play.
R. Stimpson (2002), for example, rejects the characterization of Polonius as a foolish “meddler,” arguing instead that he should be viewed as a seasoned political insider whose downfall comes as the result of “overconfidence about his schemes and his mastery of manipulative tactics.” Polonius, she concludes, could easily be imagined living today, although instead of being killed he would be investigated for political or personal indiscretions and “forced to resign.” Prince Hamlet’s characterization comes under new scrutiny by John Hardy (see Further Reading), who contends that what makes Hamlet such a memorable character is his “unpretentiousness” as well as his sincere attempt to seek the truth. Hardy asserts that it is not moral weakness or melancholy that distinguishes the Prince, but his moral strength and “an uncompromising honesty”—both of which lead him to think carefully before acting. Ronald Knowles (1999) asserts that Prince Hamlet’s thought processes reflect the evolution of Western beliefs about the place of human reason and emotion in society and notes that Hamlet’s “unique selfhood, realized through grief and loathing, cannot be sustained, since his mind is shaped by an essentialist humanism which undermines its very possibility.”

Hamlet remains Shakespeare’s most popular play on stage and screen. Many recent productions have distinguished themselves by updating the setting of the play, thereby, some critics suggest, making Hamlet more accessible to modern audiences. In his review of Campbell Scott’s 2001 filmed version, Ken Eisner (2001) observes that the relocation of the action to a mansion on the brink of World War I enhances the play’s theme of aristocracy—and by extension the monarchy—in irreversible decline. Patrick Carnegy (2001) discusses the effect on the audience of a barefooted, t-shirted Hamlet and Laertes in Steven Pimlott’s 2001 stage production, especially when contrasted with “the world of suits” represented by Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and their master, Claudius. Carnegy warns that while Pimlott succeeded in providing theatergoers with an intimate connection to the play, he risked portraying Prince Hamlet as immature. Elvis Mitchell (2000) examines Michael Almereyda’s 2000 cinematic release of Hamlet starring Ethan Hawke as the Prince and notes that “Hamlet is a movie about urban isolation and the damage it causes, using corrupted wealth as a surrogate for stained royalty.” The critic finds that the transfer of action to twentieth-century Wall Street works well, but argues that Hawke’s Hamlet wastes too much time in adolescent “moping.” Reviewing the same film, Peter Rainer (see Further Reading) contends that Almereyda’s focus on Hamlet’s similarities to the world of corporate New York occurs at the expense of the play’s other themes.

Two themes of particular concern to critics who study Hamlet are those of politics and power, especially as they relate to the political tensions of Shakespeare’s Elizabethan England. Zdravko Planinc (1998) limits his discussion to a definition of power and the ideal ruler, using Plato’s Republic as a model. Planinc asserts that the play focuses on three types of leaders, two of whom are faulty. The late King Hamlet, he claims, indulged in acts of plunder after success in battle. The current King Claudius is, among other things, a regicide. Only Prince Hamlet, he contends, has the greatness of mind to become Plato’s philosopher-king. Larry S. Champion (1993) remarks on the numerous proverbs that appear in the play, suggesting that they are used not only to delineate the characters, but also to highlight the political tensions surrounding the aging Elizabeth I and the lack of an heir to her throne. Like Champion, Donald K. Hedrick (1984) examines the theme of politics and Elizabethan society in his exploration of the play. Hedrick argues that Hamlet is both a heroic and a satiric play, and notes that in both Renaissance England and Hamlet’s Denmark satire is used by the powerless to undermine the unscrupulous acts of the powerful. Studying the theme of friendship in Hamlet, Keith Doubt notes that there are three types of friendship in the play: the loyal friendship that Horatio sustains with the Prince; the ultimately self-serving friendship extended by Rosencrantz and Guildenstern; and the friendship that the dying Laertes offers. In Doubt’s view, Laertes’s friendship is the most meaningful because it is the most charitable.

Hamlet (Vol. 82): Criticism: Overviews And General Studies

In the following essay, Knowles asserts that Prince Hamlet's thought processes reflect the evolution of Western beliefs about the place of human reason and emotion in society and that, therefore, the play is an important Renaissance document.

In the study of the development of Western culture the question of subjectivity is a much debated issue which is often directed to the Renaissance in general, and to Hamlet in particular. Beginning with section 1, “Alexander died,”¹ this essay reapproaches the question in the play. Sections 2 and 3 expand on the backgrounds of the later Middle Ages, Humanism, and skepticism, while section 4 focuses on rhetoric, particularly on the commonplaces of consolation, in relation to the proscribed status of passion in the individual and society.² The fifth section considers role-playing and reappraises the nature of Hamlet's experience: his unique selfhood, realized through grief and loathing, cannot be sustained, since his mind is shaped by an essentialist humanism which undermines its very possibility.³ To evade alienation Hamlet embraces the scripted roles within and without him;⁴ and to understand this experience the critic of early modern culture needs, like Hamlet, to look “before and after” (4.4.37).

1. “ALEXANDER DIED”

In contemplating Yorick's skull, by a process of rhetorical association Hamlet's mind moves to Alexander, the type of imperial greatness, “Dost thou think Alexander look'd o' this fashion i' th' earth?” (5.1.191-92). And then, following Horatio's confirmation, Hamlet invites his imagination to trace “the noble dust of Alexander, till a find it stopping a bung-hole” (5.1.197-98). Horatio immediately anticipates some form of sophisticated word-play—“'Twere to consider too curiously” (5.1.199)—but fails to pre-empt it: “Alexander died, Alexander was buried, Alexander returneth to dust, the dust is earth, of earth we make loam, and why of that loam whereto he was converted might they not stop a beer-barrel?” (5.1.201-05). It has been shown that within the Christian literary tradition of timor mortis, memento mori, deriving from St. Bernard, Alexander was often linked with Julius Caesar, as here (“Imperious Caesar, dead and turn'd to clay,” 5.1.206). For example both are found in a poem by Skelton and in a poem attributed to Southwell.⁵ But as Harold Jenkins has noted, in meditations on Death the leveller deriving from antiquity, Alexander appears in Lucian's Dialogue of the Dead, and in the Stoic context of Marcus Aurelius where the dust of Alexander is likened to that of his groom.⁶ In another Stoic context, Thomas Bedingfield's translation of Cardan's Comfor-te (1576), a book many have argued is the one Hamlet carries on to the stage before the “To be, or not to be” soliloquy, Alexander and Caesar are listed with several others as types of human vainglory.⁷ However, of greater importance here is the form of Hamlet's thought.

In terms of logic and rhetoric, Hamlet works through a sorites colored by tapinosis (or humiliatio). The sorites, perhaps more familiarly known as the chain-syllogism, is close to the rhetorical figure of climax or gradatio. Tapinosis is the use of a word to debase the noble. The sorites was a series of enthymemes, or abridged syllogisms, taking the last word of a sentence or clause to begin the next,⁸ the logical counterpart to the rhetorical anadiplosis. For mostly witty sophistic purposes a false proposition, or propositions, seemingly led to an inevitably outrageous conclusion. Here, the fourth proposition, “the dust is earth” is manifestly fallacious in its deliberate equivocation between the biblical “dust” (“thou art dust, and to dust shalt thou return,” Genesis 3.9.) and geological “earth” (as sand, clay, soil, humus, etc). Again, identifying the “dust” of a corpse with “earth” generally is the fallacy of accident whereby what is an adjunct or accident of something is attributed to that entirely, and vice-versa. The remains of a corpse may be said to eventually mingle with the earth, but it hardly constitutes earth as a whole.

Hamlet's cast of mind here gives expression to an individually felt pessimism, but the personal experience that gave rise to this is to some extent depersonalized by the external public modality of logic and rhetoric working through a commonplace. The argument presented by Hamlet is part of the pessimism that culminates at this point of the play, a pessimism influenced by the philosophical skepticism of what Hiram Haydn called the sixteenth-century “counter-Renaissance,” which severely challenged the optimism of Renaissance humanism.
At one point Hamlet specifically parallels the two, echoing a cultural context that needs re-examining in the light of modern scholarship. Hamlet's pessimism in part derives from his discovery of subjectivity. Renaissance ontology is closely linked to the philosophy of rhetoric whereby something like grief is understood in a specific, conventionalized way, which Hamlet reacts against but ultimately has to capitulate to, to evade the pain of his alienation. Hamlet's tragedy becomes the site of a cultural struggle between the Western tradition of Stoic rationalism and an affective individualism. As Hamlet traces the dust of Alexander, so we may trace these elements in the play, beginning indeed with that “dust.”

2. “THIS GOODLY FRAME”

For Hamlet man is the “quintessence of dust” (2.2.308), and the slain body of Polonius is “compounded … with dust whereto 'tis kin” (4.2.5). According to the queen, Hamlet had sought “with … vailed lids” his “noble father in the dust” (1.2.70-71). This last image is important since it suggests the reversal of a commonplace of Renaissance humanism, that of homo erectus. As will be shown, Renaissance celebrations of man took up the Patristic echo of this biblical theme of man's uniqueness in creation, for he was the only one of God's creatures to be created erect in order to worship the heavens, the source of his origin and end. Thomas Wilson in his The Rule of Reason (1551) included this as an example of the predicable proprium or property of man, “To go upright is proper to a man, and only to a man, and to none other living creature” (sig. C'). Hamlet's eyes and mind are fixed on earth, death, and bodily corruption. Earlier, Hamlet's sardonically chosen diction had anticipated this: “What should such fellows as I do crawling between earth and heaven?” (3.1.128-29). “Crawling,” that is, like one of the brute creation on all fours. This conscious rejection of Renaissance humanism had been systematically worked through earlier before Rosencrantz and Guildenstern: the passage needs to be quoted in full:

… this goodly frame the earth seems to me a sterile promontory, this most excellent canopy the air, look you, this brave o'erhanging firmament, this majestical roof fretted with golden fire, why, it appeareth nothing to me but a foul and pestilent congregation of vapours. What piece of work is a man, how noble in reason, how infinite in faculties, in form and moving how express and admirable, in action how like an angel, in apprehension how like a god: the beauty of the world, the paragon of animals—and yet, to me, what is this quintessence of dust?

(2.2.298-308)

The complementary parallelism of macrocosm and microcosm is turned into the antithesis of optimism and pessimism, humanism and skepticism. The fact of the speech itself is the first evidence that man is something more than a mere “quintessence of dust,” yet Hamlet is removed from the irony since the speech is a kind of mock-philosophical exercise worked up by the intellectual student from Wittenberg, seemingly to entertain Rosencrantz and Guildenstern who are, in fact, amused. Yet the similarity of this language to that on other occasions implies that Hamlet means every word. Hamlet knows that the philosophical impersonation will amuse his auditors while at the same time this guise actually reveals what he thinks to the audience of the play.9

Pico della Mirandola's Oration on the Dignity of Man (1486) is probably the most famous of what became a minor genre of Renaissance humanism, yet it is not really typical. Pico's syncretic gathering from Hebrew, Christian, and Neoplatonic writings garnished by the prisci theologi, as they are referred to—the “early theologians” Hermes Trismegistus, Zoroaster and Moses—makes a heady mystical brew, even for his Renaissance man as "maker and moulder of thyself."10 If we turn from Pico's esoteric Cabbalism to something like Giannozzo Manetti's On the Dignity of Man (1452) and its context, this will provide the background for the understanding of Hamlet's argument, the materials for which Shakespeare probably got not so much from Montaigne, but from Montaigne's source in his library, Pierre Boaistuau whose work was available to
Shakespeare in reprints of John Alday's translation.\textsuperscript{11}

The tradition concerning the debate on the dignity and misery of man is a long and ramified one. Focusing primarily on man's dignity, Charles Trinkaus originally published \textit{Adversity's Noblemen} in 1940, which, in retrospect, was a prolegomenon to a monumental two-volume study of 1970 entitled \textit{In Our Image and Likeness}. This work is primarily an intensive scholarly introduction to, and study of, the question of man's dignity in fourteenth-century Italian humanism. I am greatly indebted to this scholar but the interpretation of \textit{Hamlet} here is the present writer's own.

Dualism underpins Western culture, and the dignity and misery of man is an aspect of this. Either can be stressed at the expense of the other, or one disproportionately, or both equally depending on the speaker and the given cultural moment (or in spite of it—see George Gascoigne below). Genesis 1:26, “Let vs make man in our image according to our likenes” provided a major impetus for commentators among the early Church Fathers, in the Middle Ages, and in Renaissance humanists. St. Augustine is known for his harsh view on the depravity of man enslaved by sin, but he nevertheless believed in the soul's trinity of memory, intellect, and will as reflecting the divine Trinity. Furthermore, Augustine cited the significance of man's erect stature, his rule over animals, and his contemplation of the divine as grounds for a more spiritually positive view of man. Complementing this, another church father, Lactantius, stressed Cicero's Stoic-Platonic view of the rational design, divine purpose, and providential order of the world, again pointing out man's erect stature and the immortality of the soul. The Alexandrian Jew Philo provided a Neoplatonic link with Christianity, bringing together Greek providential rationality and Genesis 1:26, stressing the earth's plenitude at the service of man. A notoriously major figure of the Middle Ages, however, is Pope Innocent III, the author of \textit{On Contempt for the World, or The Misery of the Human Condition} (1195). In the midst of the flowering of Tudor humanism George Gascoigne translated this work as \textit{The Droome of Doomes day} (1576), though he did not know the author, in repentance for “penning and endightying sundrie toyes and trifles,” namely the poetry for which he was known.\textsuperscript{12} From vileness of conception through the catalogue of the seven deadly sins to bodily corruption and the pains of the damned, Innocent rehearses man's life and afterlife of misery and suffering. Yet he had also promised another treatise on \textit{The Dignity of Human Nature}. Presumably this would have seen man from the point of view of salvation rather than that of original sin and damnation. Innocent's treatise was copied and translated all over Europe, particularly in England,\textsuperscript{13} and eventually gave rise to the humanist debate which was prefigured most pre-eminently by Petrarch.

Petrarch's \textit{De remediis utriusque fortunae} (1354-1357) was composed as a reply to Pope Innocent. Here are found the central arguments for the dignity of man: the soul as the image of God; the incarnation; erectness of stature and the beauty of the body; the immortality of the soul; the beauty and use of the external world; man's mind, memory, intellect, eloquence, invention, and artistry; man's rule over creatures; resurrection; heavenly destination; exaltation and salvation. Here we find a complementary stress on the divine and the human, the heavenly and the earthly. This is crucial; man is celebrated not just in theological terms (which was St. Augustine's emphasis) but also in terms of earthly existence. Earth and heaven complement each other:

For what does obscenity of origin detract from human dignity? Do not tall and leafy trees, grown from filthy roots, cover the green earth with welcome shade? Are the fields of grain not made fruitful by the vilest dung? The vilest origin of the best things is not something disgusting. You are the grain fields of God to be winnowed in the plains of judgement, and to be placed in the granary of the greatest head of a household. Earthly was man's origin, although partly noble and celestial. But whatever was his origin and however difficult his progress, his final seat is heaven.\textsuperscript{14}

Such a balanced position was rarely followed with such evenhandedness. Where the seemingly complementary themes of dignity and misery are handled, as in the quattrocento treatises of Bartolomeo Facio and Antonio da Bargo, man's dignity is spiritual rather than earthly, to which the body and its misery belong.
Though Aurelio Brandolini, in his *On the Condition of Human Life and on Bearing Bodily Sickness*, expounds fully the misery of life and the joys of existence, he tips the scales towards the latter in a most remarkable statement: “Even if we know that we will be subjected to perpetual miseries and eternal punishments, nevertheless, would we not think that this so great dignity of being born and living excels all miseries and punishments?”

Brandolini was influenced by Giannozzo Manetti who wrote explicitly against Innocent III's depiction of misery, providing one of the great statements of Italian humanism, against which Hamlet's words may be measured.

With what form, what beauty, what fittingness ought we to think man was endowed, for whose sake alone, we may not doubt, this most beautiful and most ornate world was made? No wonder therefore if the ancient and modern inventors of the most ingenious arts, since they thought that the divine nature excelled and surpassed all things both inanimate and animate also, and believed that no figure was more beautiful than the human form, seem to have agreed that the gods should be shaped and painted in the image of man.

Yet within the same milieu of Italian humanism Manetti's optimistic views were opposed two years later by another Florentine statesman, Poggio Bracciolini, in his *Two Books on the Misery of the Human Condition* (1455). Whereas Manetti recognized sin in man but saw it as deriving from pride in the very dignity he acclaimed, Poggio more orthodoxly reaffirmed original sin, the source of all misery. Though life contained some material blessings, only grace could lift man above fundamental misery. Plainly it can be seen that Hamlet's speech derives from someone who has read both sides of the debate, abstracted quintessential elements from each, and starkly juxtaposed one against the other in an alternating litany of pessimism.

3. **“YOUR WORM IS YOUR ONLY EMPEROR”**

There is no doubt that Shakespeare, in his tragic period, was strongly influenced by the writings of Montaigne, though the precise nature of the debt will probably always remain impossible to determine. The passage from Montaigne's *Apology of Raymond Sebond* often cited as a parallel to Hamlet's macro-microcosm speech reads as follows, in Florio's translation:

> Who have persuaded [man] that this admirable moving of heavens vaults, that the eternal light of these lampes so fiercely rowling over his head, that the horror-moving and continuall motion of this infinite vaste ocean were established, and continue so many ages for his commoditie and service? Is it possible to imagine anything so ridiculous as this miserable and wretched creature, which is not so much as master of himselfe, exposed and subject to offences of all things, and yet dareth call himselfe Master and Emperour of this Universe?

In tracing the pessimistic dust of Alexander we shall need to look further into Montaigne, but at this stage it quickly needs to be repeated that for the arguments concerning man's dignity and misery the same source would have been available to Shakespeare that was available to Montaigne, namely Pierre Boaistuau. Boaistuau's *Bref discours de l'excellence et dignité de l'homme* (1558) was part of Montaigne's library. The work reappears as a complementary continuation of Boaistuau's *Le Théâtre du monde, où il est fait un ample discours des misères humaines* … (1561). Appearing in the mid-sixteenth century, Boaistuau's *Bref discours* looks back to the tradition Trinkaus has made available to us, for it quotes the *prisci theologi*, the Church Fathers, and notably Giannozzo Manetti ["Janotius"] and Bartolomeo Fazio. Authorities agree that Boaistuau's work was very well known. Though there is no evidence of *Le Théâtre du monde* in Montaigne's library there are sufficient verbal echoes to show that he knew this as well as the earlier work. However, as
far as Shakespeare is concerned, we have the translation into English by John Alday, *Theatrum Mundi, The Theatre or Rule of the World*, wherein may be sene the running race and course of euerye mans life, as touching miserie and felicity … whereunto is added a learned, and maruellous worke of the excellencie of *mankinde* which appeared in 1566[?], 1574, and 1603. This work was still popular enough by Burton's time to be quoted in *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621 and thereafter).20

Thus the argument that Shakespeare might have been specifically influenced in Hamlet's micro-macrocosm speech by a famous passage of Montaigne needs to be tempered by the recognition that possibly both were reacting to the same tradition—fifteen hundred years of debate epitomized in Boaistua with a clear line of transmission to England by way of Alday. Elsewhere in *Hamlet* the direct influence of Montaigne remains an issue of debate. Yet anyone who saw *Hamlet* and then read Florio's translation of Montaigne in 1603 and found something like “the heart and life of a mighty and triumphant emperor is but the break-fast of a seely little worme” (*Apology*, 232) is likely to have been reminded of Hamlet's “Your worm is your only emperor for diet” (4.3.21), part of his preoccupation with corruption and death with links to both the micro-macrocosm and “Alexander … dust” speeches. We know that a manuscript of Florio's translation of Montaigne was in circulation before its publication in 1603. Florio's patron Southampton was also Shakespeare's, but it seems that a manuscript was in circulation outside Southampton's household, since in his own essays written before 1600 Sir William Cornwallis praises the translation of his model. “Evidence” for Shakespeare’s knowledge of Montaigne falls into three classes: (1) direct quotation, (2) verbal echoes, and (3) general ideas.21 The only generally accepted example in class one is that of *The Tempest* (2.1.145-66) where Shakespeare quotes “Of the Caniballes” (L.xxx) in Gonzalo's description of an ideal commonwealth. Attention to the case of verbal echoes suggests the influence of Montaigne in the composition of *Hamlet, Troilus and Cressida, All's Well That Ends Well, Measure for Measure* and *King Lear*. In his early study, looking particularly at these plays, George Coffin Taylor found 750 words in Florio and Shakespeare which do not appear before *Hamlet*. For example, Shakespeare's “consummation” which appears in the 1605 “To be, or not to be” (3.1.56) soliloquy, is the word used by Florio to translate *aneantissement* (“annihilation” in modern dictionaries) in the speech of Socrates in the essay “Of Physiognomy” (III.xii.540). The accumulation of such instances provides strong grounds for the likelihood of Shakespeare's familiarity with Montaigne. Yet in the third category of general ideas it has been forcefully, perhaps too forcefully, argued that both Shakespeare and Montaigne relied on a body of commonplaces central to the traditions of rhetoric as taught in the culture of the Renaissance.22

The significance of commonplaces will be a major concern of the second half of this essay. Suffice it here to note that in addition to the above-quoted echoes of Montaigne Ellrodt notes as “parallels both in thought and phrasing” the line from the essay “Of the art of conferring,” concerning fortune: “My consultation doth somewhat roughtly hew the matter” (476), which Shakespeare echoes in “There's a divinity that shapes our ends, / Rough-hew them how we will” (5.2.10-11). Montaigne's “That to Philosophise is to learne how to Die” also influenced Shakespeare, although as we shall see, the thought and style of both passages derive from a common Stoic background:

Nor alive, nor dead, it doth concern you nothing.  
Alive because you are: Dead, because you are no more.  
Moreover, no man dies before his houre. The time you leave behinde was no more yours, than that which was before your birth, and concerneth you no more.

(34)

... 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, of aught he leaves, knows aught, what is't to leave betimes? Let be.
The evidence, if it amounts to such, that Shakespeare knew An Apologie of Raymond Sebond—not so much an essay as a short book—is of major significance since it is here that Montaigne gives voice most fully to the Renaissance rediscovery of classical Pyrrhonism. Montaigne's defence or apology for the rationalistic natural religion of the second book of Sebond's Natural Theology is in fact an ironic dismantling of reason with the tools of Pyrrhonian skepticism. Pyrrho's works had been lost but Diogenes Laertius's account in his Lives of the Philosophers and, above all, the outline of Pyrroho's philosophy (transmitted by Sextus Empiricus in the Hypotyposes) gave Montaigne and his contemporaries of a skeptical temper a dialectical armory. Henri Estienne published a Latin version of the Hypotyposes in 1562, and in 1569 Gentian Hervet published a Latin edition of all of Sextus's works. However, it should be noted that there is evidence for a now lost English translation of the Hypotyposes in 1590 and 1591, which is referred to by Thomas Nashe. If it was available to Nashe it could also have been available to Shakespeare.

Academic skepticism of the third century B.C. finds that no knowledge is possible, while Pyrrhonian skepticism considers this position a little too categorical, and thus, paradoxically, a form of negative knowledge: it takes the position that “there was insufficient and inadequate evidence to determine if any knowledge was possible.” The Pyrrhonist suspended judgement on all issues of knowledge and retired into a state of ataraxia, quietude or unperturbedness since, as Hamlet puts it “there is nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it so” (2.2.249-50). This sentiment has given rise to varied comment, and attribution to various sources, but as a major consideration of Pyrrhonism (though ironically Hamlet's expression is closer to Academic skepticism), the concept reappears throughout Montaigne's essay “That the taste of Goods or Evils doth greatly depend on the opinion we have of them.” “This common reflection was probably given currency by Montaigne's essay,” Harold Jenkins notes. However, given the public availability of the Hypotyposes in the 1590s in comparison with the private circulation of Florio's manuscript, this reflection is more likely to have been a topically modish reference since, as a central standpoint of Pyrrhonism, there are pages and pages devoted to the topic in Sextus. Thomas Stanley's History of Philosophy, a folio volume first published in 1655-1661, contains a complete translation of the Hypotyposes which might well depend on the lost English version of the 1590s.

At the outset, in describing “The end of skepticism,” namely the aforementioned ataraxia or “indisturbance” Sextus notes that:

For he who is of Opinion there is something Good or Bad in its own nature, is continually disturbed … Whereas he who defines nothing concerning Things naturally Good or Bad, neither flyeth nor pursueth any thing eagerly, so that he remains undisturbed.

(477)

Closer to Hamlet is the sequence in the Hypotyposes (bk. 2, chap. 24, “What that is, which is called Art about Life”) concerned with the mainspring of skepticism, the ethical relativity made manifest by comparative sociology. What is considered bad in one society is perfectly acceptable in another. With Hamlet's grief and horror of incest in mind, we find the sequence moving from “Piety towards the Dead” and mourning, to incest:

For if we did not (for example) know, that the custom of the Aegyptians is to marry their Sisters, we might falsly affirm, that it is a thing acknowledged by all, that we ought not to marry our Sisters.

(529)
And immediately following this we find the observation:

Hereupon the Sceptick observing so great difference of things, Suspends as to what is Good or Bad in its own nature, or what is absolutely to be done or not to be done … For doubtless, he who proposeth to himself that something is good or ill in its own nature, and to be done, or not to be done, is troubled many ways.

(529)

Hamlet's “for there is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so” is part of his self-defensive witty word-duel following the seemingly light-hearted lewd exchanges at the entry of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. This encounter takes a potentially serious turn with Rosencrantz's words, “the world's grown honest” (2.2.237). The palpable falsity of the claim makes Hamlet recognize that the courtiers are probably agents of Claudius, and cause him to speak of Denmark as a “prison”; that is, “honest” persons such as himself are imprisoned, figuratively speaking, and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern attend him as though they were warders. Aware that he might show his hand too soon, Hamlet regains his ground by seizing on Rosencrantz's “We think not so, my lord,” and by throwing down the gauntlet of philosophical skepticism.

The irony of such Pyrrhonic echoes is that we can discern behind the modish posture the impossibility of Hamlet's ever really being able fully to adopt the skeptic's stance. He believes only too well that murder and incest are “bad” and in need of corrective action—“something to be done,” indeed. But, as we hear, such a resolution is dialectically reversed from action to words—“To be, or not to be”—shortly after. Elsewhere in the Hypotyposes, Sextus argues the Pyrrhonist case concerning deception of the senses in such matters as the precise shape of things seen from a distance, and the question of what is relatively hot or cold to different natures (477, 482). It would not be difficult to relate these to Hamlet's skeptical language games with Polonius (“Very like a whale” 3.2.373) and Osric (“It is indifferent cold, my lord” 5.2.96).

4. “TO REASON MOST ABSURD”

Hamlet affects the postures of philosophic skepticism as a corollary to the deep pessimism he derives from his immediate experience. The prince on Alexander's “dust” is just one of the many word games which reflect the disjunction between words and things, rhetoric and reality throughout the play. Consider the subsidiary rhetorical tradition of the various applied literary arts, particularly the Ars Dictaminis, the art of letter writing and its subdivision, the consolatio. The queen offers a form of consolation to the prince:

Good Hamlet, cast thy nighted colour off,
And let thine eye look like a friend on Denmark.
Do not forever with thy vailed lids
Seek for thy noble father in the dust.
Thou know'st 'tis common: all that lives must die,
Passing through nature to eternity.

(1.2.68-73)

Gertrude's rhetorical amplication is a trite example drawn from prescriptive handbooks such as Erasmus's treatise De Conscribendis Epistolis (1521), which anticipates by example the various situations of grief and mourning. The king takes up his wife's consolatio; “you must know,” he tells Hamlet, “your father lost a father / That father lost, lost his” (1.2.89-90). To Claudius Hamlet's excessive grief is “a fault to nature, / To reason must absurd, whose common theme / Is death of fathers” (1.2.102-04). This is the usual pattern of Stoic reminders, albeit here put bluntly and unsympathetically, which urge people to control their grief by employing reason.
Formal rhetoric and its affiliated modes were thought to equip the individual with ample resources for public discourse. Rhetoric provided a massive compilation of human truths inherited from the past. Human experience became a moral taxonomy of precepts. Given an ahistorical assumption of the universality of human nature, any individual experience was a minor reflection of the collective experience embodied, for instance, in that part of rhetoric called the commonplace. W. S. Howell speaks of “a society that is satisfied with the traditional wisdom and knows where to find it.” But Hamlet's anguish is as far as one could possibly get from that “satisfaction.” “What is a man,” Hamlet asks, “If his chief good and market of his time / Be but to sleep and feed?” (4.4.33-35). The conditional question invites an automatic rebuttal in the form of the most common commonplace of them all—man is a rational animal. Hamlet's mind and discourse divide around the two factors of reason and animality:

Sure he that made us with such large discourse,
Looking before and after, gave us not
That capability and god-like reason
To fust in us unus'd. Now whether it be
Bestial oblivion, or some craven scruple
Of thinking too precisely on th' event—
A thought which, quarter'd, hath but one part wisdom
And ever three parts coward—I do not know
Why yet I live to say this thing's to do,
Sith I have cause, and will, and strength, and means
To do't …

(4.4.36-46)

Hamlet thinks rhetorically; “cause,” “will,” “strength,” and “means” are topics or places or arguments for a deliberative oration on “Should I act?” Public forms of discourse encroach upon Hamlet's subjectivity, his personal experience. In act 1, scene 2, we see Hamlet isolated by his black clothes, refusing to accept the consolations of Gertrude and Claudius. He refuses to regard his subjective personal experience of grief in objectified general terms. He hears “all that lives must die,” and agrees “Ay, madam, it is common,” yet will not accept this universally held “truth” as at all meaningful for his personal experience. Conventional wisdom teaches that such anguish is an aberration. For Gertrude it is a wayward singularity, “Why seems it so particular with thee?” (1.2.75).

Hamlet's sense of being, of alienated subjectivity brought about by grief and sexual loathing, is suspended in time from the moral imperatives of socially oriented action according to codes of honor and revenge, which is why being physically “bounded in a nutshell” for such a mind could paradoxically be ruling “infinite space” (2.2.254-55). Yet the “space” of Denmark proves to be “a prison … A goodly one, in which there are many confines, wards, and dungeons” (2.2.243, 245-56)—one of which is language. “Words, words, words” are Hamlet's jailers, and rhetoric his prison. In the words “To be, or not to be” (3.1.56ff.), Hamlet's dilemma finds perfect expression, yet their significance is beyond his grasp. Here, with the dramatically most introspective of perhaps all soliloquies, Hamlet's personal experience yields to the rhetorical disposition of the thesis. We have the opening exordium; “To die, to sleep” adds a confirmatory argument; “To sleep, perchance to dream” offers a rebuttal; “For who would bear the whips and scorns of time” opens an extensive dilation, followed by the epilogue, “Thus conscience does make cowards of us all. …” The particular locution, “To be, or not to be,” forces upon us, but not Hamlet, the awareness that the question he asks, and the speech which seemingly considers it, neutralize the suffering being between words and action; like Pyrrhus, “a neutral to his will and matter” who “Did nothing” (2.2.477-78). However, the antithesis reveals Hamlet's mind or being, although this and what follows in the famous soliloquy, the likeness of sleep and death, largely derives from Cicero's Tusculan Disputations by way of those sententia or “saws” Hamlet claims to have wiped from “the table of [his] memory” (1.5.98). Cicero's first disputation at Tusculum was the locus classicus, and any educated auditor would have recognized it and the rhetorical mode of Hamlet's speech. As they would have recalled the situation of Hecuba as a recommended topic in rhetorical handbooks, and her speech as given by the
Player as a good example of *copia verborum*, or copiousness of language, highly favored for any situation (grief, lamentation, etc.) needing expressive amplifications.\(^{33}\) “To be, or not to be” recalls the formulator of philosophic relativism and subjectivism, Protagoras, who demonstrated that there are contradictory opinions, both seemingly valid, about every issue. As Charles Osborne Macdonald puts it:

> Hamlet's ethos is partly the antilogistic habit of mind common to all schools of rhetoric, a habit of contrasting words with deeds, appearance with reality. It would be a work of supererogation to point out that Hamlet's concerns in these [antithetical] passages closely parallel those of Shakespeare himself as rhetorician and writer of tragedy.

(132)

The social exchange of words seemingly implies the parity of public meaning—a common language reflecting the sameness of individual experience. The use of the word “grief”, for example, inevitably assumes that the word has the same meaning for different individual experiences of bereavement. This essentialist aspect of language use lends itself to logic and its syllogistic basis, but in actual existence we cannot experience each other's experience per se. Only Hamlet feels Hamlet's grief. To maintain his being Hamlet refuses the public language of rhetoric and adopts a counter-rhetoric; yet, as we have seen, the humanist culture which enthroned the arts of language shapes his mind. Hamlet's existential defences are skepticism, pessimism, and seeming madness.

The madness of Hamlet takes on a specific form which an audience would have immediately understood in relation to commonplaces of language and civility. The relationship between words and things was a leading preoccupation of the Renaissance.\(^{34}\) Though some scientists doubted the value of rhetoric and rhetoric itself was open to various abuses, nevertheless the overwhelming humanist assumption was that language somehow defined both man and society; language was a hallmark of civilization. John Hayward noted in 1604, “As Philo witnesseth, societie of men is maintained by speech, as being the interpreter or rather expresser of the mind” (sig. A3\(^{v}\)). “For if *oratio* next to *ratio*, speech next to reason, be the greatest gift bestowed upon mortality, that cannot be praiseless which doth most polish that blessing of speech” is Sir Philip Sidney's gloss on the commonplace.\(^{35}\) Echoing a Stoic insistence, George Puttenham avers “for man is but his minde, and as his mind is tempered and qualified, so are his speeches and language at large, and his inward conceits be the mettall of his minde, and his manner of utterance the very warp and woofe of his conceits.”\(^{36}\) Hamlet calculatedly goes against these truisms but in a way that would have been immediately identifiable. A statement by John Hoskins is almost like an account of Hamlet's linguistic behavior:

> Yet cannot his mind be thought in tune whose words do jar, nor his reason in frame whose sentences are preposterous; nor his fancy clear and perfect whose utterance breaks itself into fragments and uncertainties.

(2)

5. “WITHIN THE BOOK AND VOLUME OF MY BRAIN”\(^{37}\)

In refusing to resign his private grief to the public world of debased value masked by rhetoric, Hamlet refuses to communicate meaningfully, but is meaningful to himself. His understanding is so intense that he is not understood. His awareness of modes of being finds a correlative in modes of meaning. The intensity of his preoccupation with being, its origin and end, finds expression in concentrated language, particularly in the pun and the paradox. Consider the following exchange:

Hamlet:
For if the sun breed maggots in a dead dog, being a good kissing carrion—have you a daughter?

POLONIUS:
I have, my lord.

HAMLET:
Let her not walk i’ th’ sun. Conception is a blessing, but as your daughter may conceive—friend, look to’t.

(2.2.181-86)

Editors annotate these words variously, but perhaps it would be just as well to dwell first on their difficulty, which is that their immediate obliquity renders them largely meaningless. That is, language does not communicate, at least to Polonius (and us?). Yet Hamlet appears to be in control of the situation since he baffles Polonius wilfully. And yet he cannot be said to baffle Polonius completely since Polonius thinks that he is mad anyway, and Hamlet is confirming his belief with his “antic disposition” (1.5.180). Upon re-examination of the passage we can begin to unravel its meaning. The sun is the source of decay, yet in the form of life—the sun breeds (maggots) in what is already dead (a dog). In considering the process of fleshly corruption by lewd association of the physiological with the moral, Hamlet thinks of Ophelia (“have you a daughter?”) and of human conception and birth. When he recommends “Let her not walk i’ th’ sun,” he puns on the sun as source of procreative life; the sun and son, namely Hamlet as possible procreator; and the sun as emblem of kingship. In sum, keep her out of the court where the procreative act, sex, is corrupt, “but as your daughter may conceive, friend look to’t.” In this brief exchange, as with the micro-macrocosm speech, and as with the “Alexander … dust” speech, we see Hamlet’s preoccupation with the antithetical nature of existence in corruption and generation, life and death.

Hamlet’s final step before the close of the play is to move to Stoicism. In the claim “There’s a divinity that shapes our ends, / Rough-hew them how we will” (5.2.10-11), action is resigned to fatalistic passivity, like Hamlet’s mechanistic “continual practice” (5.2.207) at duelling. The verbal image twice removes Hamlet from the reality: practising for the formalized sport which simulates actual fighting. (As the physical counterpart to the soliloquist, the idea of Hamlet solus, shadow-duelling like the shadow-boxer, is irresistible). This Stoicism appears in the above-quoted passage (5.2.216-20) that has given rise to much textual and interpretive debate. Rather than enter into the controversy concerning lines 218-20 (“… The readiness is all. Since no man, of aught he leaves, / knows aught, what is’t to leave betimes? Let be.”) the reader may consult the “long note” supplied by Harold Jenkins (565-66). Suffice it here to observe two aspects of the general character of the passage. “There is special providence in the fall of a sparrow” specifically echoes Matthew 10.29, a verse customarily referred to in discussions of both general and particular, or “special,” providence, usually with reference to Calvin’s Institutes. This Christian allusion can be linked to the “heaven ordinant” Hamlet alleges earlier in the scene (5.2.48). Some commentators would also consider the passage beginning “There’s a divinity that shapes our ends” (5.2.10) to argue for a sense of Christian belief. That is, to turn from the negativity of pessimism and skepticism to the positives of religious affirmation. Yet there is the unquestionable Stoicism in the thought and style, particularly of lines 219-20 which one scholar finds “a commonplace in Stoics as divergent as Seneca, Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius,” and furthermore, “the whole passage has strikingly close parallels to a type of Stoic doctrine current in the late English Renaissance.” A passage in Epictetus is particularly close, “I must die: if instantly, I will die instantly: if in a short time, I will dine first; and when the hour comes, then I will die. How? As becomes one who restores what is not his own.” Final Stoic resignation seems more consistent with the development of pessimism in the play which culminates in Alexander’s “dust” in the preceding scene, whereas any Christian resonance would seem ironic in suggesting what is denied Hamlet, rather than what he has found.
Shakespeare was manifestly drawn to the popular genre of the revenge tragedy because it gave him the opportunity to confront a condition of being and acting. In the revenger's delay he could explore an individual suffering, suffering in the sense of being acted upon, both externally and internally, socially and psychologically, to produce Hamlet's unique alienation. In the development of Western culture Shakespeare's discovery of subjectivity in Hamlet is as momentous as the Renaissance discovery of perspective in art. Shakespeare's inner psychological perspective offers a counter-humanist reversal. To the later Middle Ages and the Renaissance, alienation suggested *homo viator*, the fallen Christian traveller alienated from God in this pilgrimage of life seeking reunion ultimately in heaven. Hamlet's subjectivity is more like the existential alienation discussed by twentieth century commentators.\textsuperscript{41}

Hamlet's father's death, his mother's concupiscence and hasty marriage to her husband's murderer, produce a grief and loathing of such a profound degree that a sense of being created by emotion estranges him from the previous identity of a princely role. Hamlet anticipates this in his response to the revelations of the ghost:

\begin{quote}
Remember thee?
Yea, from the table of my memory
I'll wipe away all trivial fond records,
All saws of books, all forms, all pressures past
That youth and observation copied there,
And thy commandment all alone shall live
Within the book and volume of my brain,
Unmix'd with baser matter.
\end{quote}

(1.5.97-104)

Hamlet does not realize that this is impossible. He cannot replace a mind shaped by rhetoric with unalloyed feeling. Rhetoric provided not just knowledge, but how knowledge was assimilated and understood: it provided a cognitive structure which enforced the Western censure of emotion. Consequently, in desperation, Hamlet ponders on dissolution of mind and body: “O that this too too sullied flesh would melt” (1.2.129). But Hamlet's body actually undergoes a kind of reification when we hear, “whilst this machine is to him” (2.2.122-23), the first recorded instance of the word used in this way (\textit{OED 4.c}). Hamlet is imprisoned by rhetoric, the enemy within. He is self-policied by the inescapable guardians of rationalism and sin who suppress the radical threat of passion. His only options are loss of selfhood in real madness or to reassume a role which travesties his truth. He hides his “mystery” within the conventions of love's madness. Then Hamlet, the former courtier, soldier, and scholar, seizes the opportunity to become actor-manager, and then the philosopher roles of skeptic and stoic, until he finally capitulates to the most evasive of all roles, the return of “Hamlet the Dane” (5.1.251). It is the most evasive because it completely confounds social and private, past and present, illusion and authenticity, in its conformity with the world of public values where seeming cannot be differentiated from being. Only the audience is fully aware of the existential disjunction between subjective being and public self-presentation. Burkhardtian Renaissance man undergoes that primal nausea: in Hamlet's words, “how ill all's here about my heart” (5.2.208-09).

The commonplace voiced in \textit{Hamlet}, “to thine own self be true” (1.3.78), has a long history, from the inscription at the oracle of Delphi, through the Latin West as \textit{nosce te ipsum}, up to the concluding advice of Polonius to Laertes, where it is vulgarized as conventional prudence. Platonic traditions interpreted this axiom as the necessity of self-knowledge as the first stage towards a knowledge of ideal forms, or an assent to spiritual selfhood. In Christian thought self-knowledge denoted the rational soul's awareness of its origin and end: its conception in sin and its parallel striving by ascent to Godhead.\textsuperscript{42} But within the Christian tradition St. Augustine made a crucial distinction. He conceived of the self as a kind of emptiness or negation that is fulfilled by recognition of the need for relationship and dependence on God. For Augustine, the soul “has consciousness of being but does not know \textit{what} it is.”\textsuperscript{43} If the Christian contexts of soul, Godhead and sin are removed, this remark lays bare the existential anguish that is found in Hamlet.
Consciousness, at this stage of the development of individualism in Western culture, was always consciousness of being-sinful, or consciousness of being-in-love, or consciousness of self as being-for-others. In secular terms, selfhood and identity were authenticated by the externals of name, fame, glory, and reputation. Hamlet's consciousness of self as self, or pure being simply existing, over and above sentience, originates in a vacuum of grief and loathing enveloped by his own facticity, the continuum of past and present identity. Ophelia's account of Hamlet's distracted state is a paradigm of Hamlet's situation.

He took me by the wrist and held me hard.
Then goes he to the length of all his arm,
And with his other hand thus o'er his brow
He falls to such perusal of my face
As a would draw it. Long stay'd he so.
At last, a little shaking of mine arm,
And thrice his head thus waving up and down,
He rais'd a sigh so piteous and profound
As it did seem to shatter all his bulk
And end his being. That done, he lets me go,
And with his head over his shoulder turn'd
He seem'd to find his way without his eyes,
For out o'doors he went without their helps,
And to the last bended their light on me.

(2.1.87-100)

Full quotation brings out the nature of the encounter. “Th'observ'd of all observers” (3.1.156) undergoes a dialectical scrutiny as we scrutinize him scrutinizing Ophelia as she recounts the meeting. As part of his “antic disposition” (1.5.180) Hamlet as distracted lover rehearses a role (“… all unbrac'd, / No hat … Ungarter'd” 2.1.78-80) in which the imposture brings home a greater truth. Reversing the interanimation of lovers' souls here, Hamlet's act elicits an authentic response, and he experiences the facticity of his former self in Ophelia's eyes as he recedes into his own truth of suffering, and recedes from the possibility of Ophelia or her auditor's understanding. But not from ours, as we have the experience of the soliloquies—the objective correlative for Hamlet's emotion that T. S. Eliot could not find (48).

The church is concerned with the numinous, with essences, while the theatre as the main expression of Renaissance secularism, is concerned with existences. As part of anthropocentric humanism the human agent was depicted in poetry and eloquence. But the twin forces of skepticism and nominalism served to undermine the efficacy of “words, words, words.” The scholastic solidity of the Thomist resolution of the Christian and Aristotelian in the formula of the soul as the form of the body held off the destructive dualism of such things as Manicheism and Gnosticism. But as the twentieth century French catholic intellectual Jacques Maritain saw, it was ultimately the Method of Descartes which broke up

the superior conciliations in which the antinomies of the real were resolved by Scholasticism into two conflicting pieces which it affirms separately and which it cannot unite; and from there on this philosophy places side by side a thesis and antithesis equally extreme, one of which serves to mask the other.

(44-45)

Commenting on this passage Roy W. Battenhouse finds, “Here, I believe, is the key to the contradictions and maskings of Hamlet. Yet Descartes is not our only key, for his ‘antinomic errors’ hark back to classical antiquity and continue forward to today [in] Idealism and Existentialism” (1107-08).
This essay has sought to reexamine the question of subjectivity in *Hamlet* by reappraising the significance of the Renaissance revival of philosophic skepticism; the continued debate between medieval views of the misery of man's life and the Renaissance celebration of existence; the particular importance of the commonplace in the theory and practice of dialectical and rhetorical topics. At the center has been the cultural derogation of passion, in both Stoic and Christian tradition. In the anguish of grief and loathing Hamlet's subjectivity is realized in a consciousness which rejects the wisdom of tradition for the unique selfhood of the individual. This subjectivity is not an anachronism retroactively conferred by the culture of bourgeois individualism, the essentialism of liberal humanism. An ahistorical essentialist view of man derives from both Greek and Latin humanism, above all in rhetoric, and Christian belief in the universality of man's fallen condition, according to Scripture. Such apparent transcendence has, however, been located within the cultural moment of historical change and continuity. Culture is as much within as without the mind and Hamlet is forced to submit to the plot and history, albeit in a series of burlesque roles, but for a moment he has stood seemingly, “Looking before and after” (4.4.37), back to antiquity and forward to our own age (perhaps even more than Battenhouse conjectured) in which “identity crisis” has become a commonplace expression.

Famously, Montaigne could query “Que sais-je,” his motto which was struck on one side of a personal medal, yet throughout the *Essais*, for all the recorded vagaries of his thought, nothing is in fact so solid as the mind and identity of the retired Bordeaux magistrate who could balance Pyrrhonian skepticism with his declared fideism. The other side of his medal was a pair of scales in suspense. In contrast, Hamlet's existential anguish, suspended between word and action, can neither retreat into that “indisturbance,” *ataraxia*, or embrace pure faith. Instead he stands there as spectator of the plot invoking Alexander's dust, not so much “reading the book of himself” as Mallarmé claimed, but fulfilling the true Herculean task that subsequent history has made manifest—bearing modernism on his shoulders.

**Notes**

1. Shakespeare, 5.1.201. All references to *Hamlet* are to Harold Jenkins's edition.
2. Like Katharine Eisaman Maus, I am concerned with what she calls “the early modern rhetoric of inwardness” (30) which is “intimately related to transcendental religious claims” (27). But the secular emphasis I develop here shows how the phrase “rhetoric of inwardness” becomes a contradiction in terms.
3. For Catherine Belsey, Hamlet is retroactively interpreted as “the unified and unique subject of liberal humanism” (52). My interpretation is largely based on a reconsideration of the subject as conceived by the traditions of rhetoric which culminate in Renaissance humanism.
4. Francis Barker writes: “At the centre of Hamlet, in the interior of his mystery, there is, in short, nothing. The promised essence remains beyond the scope of the text's signification: or rather, signals the limit of the signification of this world by marking out the site of an absence it cannot fill. It gestures towards a place for subjectivity, but both are anachronistic and belong to an historical order whose outline has so far only been sketched out” (37). To determine as closely as possible the dramatic conflict between Hamlet's “mystery” and “nothingness,” this essay historicizes the signifying practices of the text.
7. Craig.
9. As Forker generalizes on Hamlet's “playing” with characters, words, and roles, “pretense may entail revelation” (5).
11. Spencer, 29, mentions Boaistuau and the English tradition in a context which also includes Montaigne, but he seems not to be aware of the latter's ownership, the translator's identity, or the various dates of the translation.
12. Identified by Spencer, 27.
13. Lewis, 3-5.
15. Ibid., 1:302.
16. Ibid., 1:246-47.
18. Ibid.; Sozzi, 178.
20. See the entry on Alday in the Dictionary of National Biography.
21. I am indebted to Ellrodt for this classification.
22. For example in Harmon.
24. Popkin, xiii.
25. Shakespeare, 461-68.
26. This and all subsequent references to Sextus are from Stanley.
27. Compare Gorfain's anthropological approach: “A metacommunicative account of play helps explain how playing uses impunity both to evade responsibility and to enact figurative meanings” (33).
28. Boyce, 775-76. Erasmus quotes from Cicero's Ad Familiares on death as “that which is common to us all” (166).
29. William Baldwin's very popular Treatise presents perhaps the baldest of such compilations.
30. As Lechner, 68-69, points out, in practice the analytic topics deriving from the categories and predicables sometimes became confused with what Aristotle called the “special” or subject topics. In addition, Jardine, 179-86, describes the important development from syllogistic logic to a topics logic in Renaissance humanism. The significance of Rudolph Agricola's De inventione dialectica in this respect is well accounted for in Mack. For a useful general introduction see Jacobus's introductory chapter, “Backgrounds in Logic” (1-20).
31. W. S. Howell, 23. Kristeller writes of “a kind of common wisdom that could be learned, imitated, and utilized,” but adds, “The frequency of quotations and of commonplaces repeated in the moral literature of the Renaissance gives to all but its very best products an air of triviality” (281).
32. Cicero, The Tusculan Disputations, bk. 1 (“On the Contempt of Death”), section 41: “By dying I shall go from hence into some other place; wherefore, if all sense is utterly extinguished, and if death is like that sleep which sometimes is so undisturbed as to be even without the vision of dreams—in that case, O ye Gods! What gain it is to die” (327).
33. T. W. Baldwin points out, for example, that the recommendation of the commentator Veltkirchius on Erasmus's Copia made “the plaint of Hecuba in Book XIII of the Metamorphoses … the stock illustration of excessive use of copy to move the affections” (2:193-94).
34. See A. C. Howell.
35. Sidney, 121-22.
37. In effect Hamlet's analogy reverses the movement described by Lechner: “While the ancient orators conceived of the topics and their seats of arguments as located in the mental areas of the mind in which thought processes developed and were expressed in the oral tradition of the spoken word, the Renaissance teacher and schoolboy tended more to locate his topics and their accumulated wisdom outside the mind on the pages of his commonplace book where thoughts were manipulated like objects” (236).
38. In fact this image of Hamlet burlesques the Stoic askesis, mastery over oneself, by the exercises of melete (meditation) and gymnasia (physical training). See Foucault, 34-39.
40. “Of the things which are, and of those which are not, in our own power” 1.1.9 (5). Morgan, 553-54.
For the medieval view see Ladner, for the modern compare Schacht. Kristeller observes that “Renaissance thought and literature are extremely individualistic in that they aim, to a degree unknown in the Middle Ages and to most of ancient and modern times, at the expression of individual, subjective opinions, feelings, and experiences” (305). But that word “individualistic” flattens out necessary distinctions: the humanist orator-writer-poet uses his ethos or personality as part of a rhetorical strategy to win over an audience or readership. Subjectivity, regarded from an existential point of view, defines itself against, or separate from, the public world, since it derives in large part from a breakdown between the discourses of self and status, role and the world.

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Hamlet (Vol. 82): Criticism: Character Studies


[In the following essay, Stimpson rejects the characterization of Polonius as a foolish “meddler,” arguing instead that he should be viewed as a seasoned political insider.]

I once worked with a man who reveled in his authority but was too shrewd to revel in it gloriously, exuberantly, or crassly. Although his power base was a local institution, he had been a part of some of the large events of his time. He had served on national commissions. He had names on his Rolodex that he could and did drop. He believed in good manners, but at more informal gatherings, he would wear a bright, loosely tied scarf and chat up younger women with a glee that pushed at the envelope of his moderation. He thought of himself as a good man, and often spoke of his contributions to high-minded causes. Just as adamantly, he thought of himself as a wise man and diplomatic counselor, and was proud of his ability to come to the heart of the matter with the precision of a cardiologist. Slipping into retirement, he was even more absorbed by the
delicacies of hierarchical arrangements and prickly about his position. He fussed at length about who should or should not be included in meetings. Once, when he thought he had been wrongly excluded from the routing of a draft report, he wrote, in anger, without irony, “There’s a lot of quack left in this lame duck.” Neither of us was spontaneously fond of the other. If I were to interpret his public comments about me disagreeably, I would conclude that he found me too strident, too vain about my judgments, and too strong-willed to take advantage of his advice. I dealt with him because the situation demanded that I do so. In private, I found him irritating and untrustworthy, and called him Polonius.

During this period of my life, I attended a production of Hamlet and rudely left at the interval. This was the fault not of the production but of my temperament. I was too impatiently aware of what was going to happen in terms of plot and poetry. The performance of Polonius, however, was fascinating. He was no gabby old fool. The actor was dressed in a morning coat and ascot. He looked well tailored, well shaved. One could easily imagine that he had once been an amorous, love-frenzied young man, or a university student actor playing Julius Caesar, as Polonius did. Suave, smooth, and mature in manner, he was now a supremely confident high-court official. His advice to his son about social relations, friendship, violence, money, and existential authenticity made sense. When he got into difficulty, it was not because of pending senility but because of overconfidence about his schemes and his mastery of manipulative tactics.

Like those of all imagined characters of unusual force and palpability, Polonius's domains have expanded from literature to life, where he has become a label, a social category. Since my experiences of Polonius in literature and life, I have wondered who and what a Polonius in a modern state might be. He is, I have decided, a powerful figure in a large institution, preferably the executive branch of the federal government. However, he moves easily among institutions. He can work in the private sector or a think tank or a public policy school in an affluent private university. When he is not in the government, and is instead rusticating in the private sector, he likes being a pundit. In that role, he enjoys writing op-ed pieces and going on television. The pundit occupies a strategic space in contemporary public discourse. Although some female pundits exist, he is usually a man.

The origins of the word are themselves masculine. Pundit derives from the Sanskrit pandita, which means “learned, wise; a learned man, a teacher, an authority; one who announces his judgment, opinions, or conclusions in an authoritative manner; a critic.” The word entered English through Hindi, another appropriation from the era of the British rule of the Indian subcontinent.

Today, the figure of the pundit provokes ambivalent reactions: admiration but some sneers, sneers but some indifference, indifference but some envy. On the one hand, he has wisdom, expertise, and an insider's insights and material for gossip. Unlike “the spokesman,” who proudly represents a known figure or cause, the pundit has a patina of nonpartisanship. He may have been in the trenches of partisan warfare, but he has then risen above the fray and settled into a more elevated public square. He is a talking head—the colloquial term for the informed television commentator—who is at home with headlines. Think tall, jowly David Gergen, acclaimed for being a reliable voice after having served four presidents from two parties. Unlike our sanctioned court jesters in the media, the pundit radiates an air of agreeable seriousness and decorum. Jay Leno may entertain at a White House correspondents' dinner and show risqué mock news clips of Secretary of State Madeleine Albright while goosing a foreign diplomat as the two of them stand behind a podium. The pundit would attend the dinner and afterward comment on the appropriateness of Leno's comic turn. Unlike an obsequious courtier or personal assistant, the pundit maintains his dignity and gravitas. He is no foppish Osric. On the other hand, the pundit may seem like an inflated balloon in need of pricking, a condescending teacher. This officious figure has spawned a rebellious offspring, the punk pundit, with brawny and belligerent manners and a hip haircut, who in America appears most often on our late-night, edgy talk shows. As my taxonomy of punditry reveals, the modern media have now spawned so many pundits that their authoritative voices blur and blend into a large, mildly disharmonious chorus. No single pundit rules.
It may be hard to imagine Polonius as a pundit. This is not because of the messy difficulties of transposing the dramatic setting of the Danish court of Hamlet and its Privy Councillor to that of a modern government and a high official. The difficulty is that the prevailing image of Polonius today is that of the boring, garrulous, fussy old meddler. Please note how my nickname for the man whom I introduced in my first paragraph perpetuates this stereotype. Polonius is tragedy's older counterpart of Malvolio in *Twelfth Night*, which was written at about the same time as Hamlet. It is as if Hamlet's assessment of Polonius as a “foolish prating knave” had become ours entirely. If Dr. Johnson, who gives Polonius some dignity and worldly smarts, writes that he is “dotage encroaching upon wisdom,” our stereotype makes Polonius dotage fleeing from wisdom. For impotent J. Alfred Prufrock, by fate and character incapable of being Hamlet, an attendant lord or Polonius is his Shakespearean mirror image, “an easy tool / deferential, glad to be of use / Politic, cautious, and meticulous.” When such a tediously risible Polonius dies like a rat, the audience is pleased. In 1978, Saul Bellow said meanly, “One of the nice things about *Hamlet* is that Polonius gets stabbed.”

If we accept the stereotype, we shove aside a truth about Polonius: he is a very difficult, puzzling, and seemingly malleable character. These features have provoked contradictory readings and performances. For some, he may be a total buffoon; for others, he is a statesman. For some, he is a sexually prurient father who may have incestuous longings for his daughter; for others, he is decent and good enough to inspire the love of both his children. In the 1950s, *Shakespeare Quarterly* was the site of one learned quarrel about the degree of his foolishness. To excavate this quarrel is to do a small archaeology of the theoretically reticent literary criticism that held sway before the 1960s. The spat began with Josephine W. Bennett's “Characterization in Polonius's Advice to Laertes.” Is it, she asks, a distillation of “practical wisdom” or a series of clichés, mere conventional wisdom? (The pundit, of course, traffics in conventional wisdom. If he were too unconventional, he would shock and scare away his audience.) Bennett's question is not only rhetorical. The degree of Polonius's “dignity” rests upon the answer. Like others, Bennett traces Polonius's advice to his son in act 1 to John Lyly, but both Lyly and Shakespeare, she argues, have as their source Isocrates' *Ad Demonicum*. “Shakespeare's audience,” she claims, “could be trusted to recognize it as a familiar and conventional set of wise saws … schoolboy wisdom in the mouth of one … now entering his second childhood.” Bennett then systematically slaps down any other claims to dignity that Polonius might have. He is not a “caricature” of Lord Burleigh. He thus lacks the standing that a significantly satiric figure might have. Although he works in the royal household, he is merely in charge of protocol and entertainment. He introduces ambassadors and arranges for theatricals. His role, Bennett writes, is like that of the “chief secretary of the White House.” He thus lacks the standing that a deeply trusted counsel would have. Finally, his children might be fond of him, but it “does (not) follow that, because his children loved him, therefore he must have been worthy of their devotion.” He thus lacks the standing that a revered patriarch would have.

Bennett's onslaught provoked Polonius's defenders. In “Isocrates' Precepts and Polonius's Character,” G. K. Hunter flatly declares Bennett wrong. Shakespeare's audience, he argues, would find Polonius's advice sage, its conventionality a sign that it could be trusted, not scorned. Moreover, the Countess of Rousillon in *All's Well That Ends Well* offers parallel counsel. Polonius is in good company. As the audience goes deeper into the play, it learns that Polonius's advice is inadequate, but, Hunter suggests, this is less a comment on Polonius than on the “inadequacy of all advice” when we must confront the conditions the play dramatizes: regicide, ghosts of murdered kings, fratricide, adultery, incest, murder, and revenge. Joining but modifying Hunter is O. B. Davis's “A Note on the Function of Polonius's Advice,” which makes Polonius the embodiment of the slippery, self-interested, and corner-cutting ethics of the Elsinore court. Polonius gives advice “to a young man on the make.” Elkin Calhoun Wilson's “Polonius in the Round,” a title that cutely puns on the roundness of Shakespeare's Globe Theatre and E. M. Forster's sketch of complex literary characters as “round,” is a more full-throated defense, one that finds Polonius much more than a “fool and a knave.” To be sure, he is comic in his lectures and in the tenacity of his pursuit of the idea that spurned love is the motive for Hamlet's bizarre behavior. Although Wilson does not credit Henri Bergson's theory of comedy as rigid behavior in sudden conflict with contingency, his analysis of Polonius echoes it. However, Wilson concludes, Polonius also has a “minor tragic dimension.” He loves his daughter and wants to help his kings,
admirable motives that come to naught.

The Shakespearean Polonius is difficult, puzzling, and seemingly malleable for a reason. It makes strategic sense for him to be so. If he were easily and consistently knowable, easily and consistently interpretable, he could not do his job. He must be a man who knows more about people than they know about him. He accomplishes what he must accomplish—management of a small but tricky political world—by wearing masks, playing games, setting traps. His hiding behind the arras is one way of spying on the action of the court. He also conceals his considerable and considered ambitions. As Marvin Rosenberg writes, “Polonius is dangerous. His objective to begin with is to sustain the establishment, and make it work for himself and his family.”

Moreover, he is a liminal character, moving away from a position of cognitive control. He has lost a beat or two. When he and Hamlet are initially talking to the traveling players, Hamlet ribs him by saying that he falls asleep at a performance unless it's a “jig or a tale of bawdry.” He has fantasies of retiring and keeping a farm and carters. In normal conditions, his slowing down might be disguised and patched over, but normal conditions have become radically unsettled. Gertrude is still queen, but Claudius is now king, and Polonius must cope with him and maintain his position as influential court insider. Prince Hamlet, whom he has known since infancy, is acting up, acting out, coming on to his daughter, and calling him, Polonius, a fishmonger.

Most recently, John Updike, no more able to resist Hamlet than any other great writer, reimagined both Shakespeare and Shakespeare's sources in his novel Gertrude and Claudius. His Polonius, called Corambis, is secretive, watchful, and sly. He is portly, his hair is greasy, his mouth is fleshy and tremulous. Dressed in ludicrous tunics and sugarloaf-shaped hats, he is more grotesque than “my” Polonius.

As a progenitor of a modern pundit, “my” Polonius embodies more polished connections between power and language even if they are beginning to show some tarnish. He has his attractive features and character strengths. His public power is that of a high, experienced court official. He understands war and relations between Denmark and Norway, Poland, France, England. In part, his role is ceremonial. Implementing it, he seems to grasp the performative aspects of maintaining the highest office in the land—its spectacles, protocols, and rituals. He likes the blare of trumpets and the rustle of banners. In part, his role is that of a policymaker, and his long survival suggests he is probably very good. He likes spying and surveillance. Furthering his political and personal ends, Polonius can lie and equivocate. He knows this about himself. If there were telephones to tap, he would do it. If there were electronic bugs and tiny hidden cameras to plant, he would do that as well. When he sends an employee, Reynaldo, to spy on Laertes, the son who is a student at the University of Paris, he instructs Reynaldo expertly and, I suggest, with relish. Like all cunning liars, he knows that falsehood must be calibrated. He warns Reynaldo not to make so many false accusations against his son that Laertes will be dishonored. In brief, the student actor has transferred his love of stagecraft to a love of statecraft that demands dishonesty and disguise. He is a fine, seasoned conniver.

However, he is not the king in a hierarchical court. He has power but not absolute power. He is at the right hand of royalty, but he is not royal. His voices reflect his position. On the one hand, he can be directive. As “The Mousetrap” plays on, and Hamlet interprets it, the frightened Claudius rises to go; it is Polonius who orders the play to stop. He can usher dignitaries in and out with aplomb. I might even say that he serves as a pundit for the small but significant audience of the court. He believes he can “find / Where truth is hid, though it were hid indeed / Within the centre.” Serving as a cultural pundit, he discusses the theater in a passage that has been mocked but that can be read as lighthearted criticism. He is also a family pundit for his children. Much of what he says is useful or sound. His voices are often rotund but essentially straightforward. When Hamlet kills him, his speech is as clear as it can be, “O, I am slain.” However, on the other hand, Polonius can be obsequious and flattering when he speaks in the voice of those who must serve the powerful as well as wield power under their direction. Serving the powerful generally entails making them comfortable, even with bad news. Some of his speeches that might seem silly are actually soporific bromides, rhetorical tranquilizers.
to calm people enough to get them through difficult situations. Similarly, they might be verbal sugar coatings for the delivery of bitter information.

Take, for example, act 2, scene 2. It begins with Claudius and Gertrude hiring Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to help them understand and control Prince Hamlet. They are now new, albeit junior, advisers to the king. In circles of power, any newcomer is a potential rival. Gertrude believes that Hamlet's transformation, his actions and distractions, are the result of his father's death and her over-hasty marriage, but she confides this only to Claudius. Polonius then enters with two pieces of good news. One is political. The ambassadors have returned with a deal favorable to Denmark. The second is domestic. He, Polonius, has found the “very cause of Hamlet's lunacy.” The latter seems more compelling to Claudius than the former, but Polonius wants to defer giving the domestic news. It is, after all, a bit of a problem to tell your queen that her “noble son” is mad because he is gaga with love for your daughter and then to assure your king and queen that your primary loyalty and obedience is to them; that you are not trying to advance yourself by exploiting the prince's passion; that your daughter's primary loyalty and obedience is to you, her father, and not to the prince's love and lust; and that you will be part of the solution, not part of the problem. Polonius's technique is to soften up the royal couple by persuading them to hear out the successful ambassadors before hearing him out. That accomplished, he blathers on, risking the Queen's impatience, calculating that his deferrals will have the effect of making the royal couple want to cut through his rhetoric and get to the nugget of news. His climax is his description of Hamlet's swoon after Ophelia, following paternal orders, refuses to see him. Polonius cleverly combines a sequence of short descriptions of drastic actions and alternating dactylic and trochaic rhythms that ease the blows:

And he …
Fell into a sadness, then into a fast,
Thence to a watch, then into a weakness,
Thence to a lightness, and, by this declension,
Into the madness wherein now he raves,
And all we wait for.

It works. Persuaded, Claudius and Gertrude accept Polonius's scheme to entrap Hamlet, and exploit Ophelia, by having Ophelia encounter Hamlet while the King and his loyal counselor watch from behind that notorious arras. At its worst—an extreme that Polonius generally avoids—the language of deferential service becomes fawning, the “candied tongue lick(ing) absurd pomp / And crook the pregnant hinges of the knee.” And fawning becomes sycophancy, which in English has several vulgar synonyms that speak to a perverse combination of love, appetite, self-abasement, toadyng, and excrement.

Polonius has a second source of power as well, that of the patriarch. Here he is absolute. A widower, he can command his two children. The mood of the patriarch can be imperative, especially to his daughter. He demands that she tell him the truth about her relationship with Hamlet. He pooh-poohs her responses and tells her that she speaks “like a green girl,” a foreshadowing of her death dressed in weeds and flowers. Structurally, of course, Hamlet plays the royal family off against the Privy Councillor's family, most dramatically Hamlet against Laertes as sons who must avenge their fathers. Although covertly, the first scene sets up the play's intricate correspondences between the two families. The extent of the thematic and dramatic relations between the two families makes plausible the possibility of interpreting Polonius's possessiveness of Ophelia as masked incestuous desires. If Gertrude and her brother-in-law are committing incest, could not Ophelia, the only other woman in the play except for a clump of ladies with their lords, be a shadowy representation of incest as well? And could she not be the victim of desire by both the father and the brother? After her death, Laertes will leap into her grave so that he can catch her “once more in mine arms.” Only she, the compliant daughter and sister, is acted upon in the possibly incestuous drama, while Gertrude, the two-fold wife and once-foaled mother, acts in her clearly incestuous drama.
Polonius's hinge position between the court, where he exercises a power dependent upon his skill and position, and the home, where he exercises a power independent of anyone, is clear in his first scene. The new royal family, the Council, Polonius and his son, and Lords Attendant enter to a flourish of trumpets. Claudius with confidence and real competence summarizes the new state of things in Denmark. Then he summons Laertes and praises the bonds between the throne of Denmark and Polonius, who seems to have accepted the new order of things without a qualm or quiver. Laertes politely begs the King's permission to return to France. Claudius then asks if Polonius approves. Polonius's answer is his first speech, which reveals a son who must beg a father for permission to leave, and a father who must beg a monarch to endorse his permission:

He hath, my lord, wrung from me my slow leave
By laboursome petition, and at last
Upon his will I sealed my hard consent.
I do beseech you give him leave to go.

Polonius's immediate problem in the play is not the departure of his son but the romantic entanglements of his daughter with Prince Hamlet, back from Wittenberg University because of his father's death. Polonius, coping, fuses his role as court official and patriarch. Doing so, he has to juggle several unpleasant scenarios. The two scenarios that neither he nor his son can imagine are that the Prince and his daughter might actually be in love, or that the King and Queen, especially the Queen, might approve of their marriage. This inability to imagine love is a huge mistake. As a consequence, Polonius concludes that he has to protect his daughter's virginity, which is priceless. If she is not a virgin, the family has lost honor, a possibility that also worries Ophelia's brother. She is also far less marriageable. But what if Hamlet has slept with her daughter? Or is urging her to sleep with him? And what if she wants to sleep with him? Polonius must also protect his position at court. Hamlet appears to be a lunatic, although Polonius is too shrewd and too much of a faker himself not to wonder if there is method to his madness. But what if Hamlet really is crazy, and what if his love for Ophelia has driven him there? Will Claudius and Gertrude get angry at Polonius and by extension at Polonius's family? Will his position be threatened? And what if Hamlet might want to marry his daughter? Or his daughter to marry him? Doesn't he have more status than she? Would she look too ambitious? Wouldn't this be trouble for everyone?

Polonius's contribution to the destruction of Elsinore and to his self-destruction has its primary source in the anxious stupidity of his interpretations and the persistence with which he acts on them. Even when younger, he might have been as smug about his insights. Youthful as well as older politicians wreak havoc because of their certainties. Indeed, to focus on Polonius as a dodderer permits us to align his errors with age—not with the cognitive arrogance of power. Even though Polonius is a corporate partner in the death and waste of Elsinore, his last action has a tattered shred of decency. He calls Hamlet's attention to himself in his hiding place because he hears Gertrude calling for help and echoes her. And Hamlet, notoriously, thinks Polonius is Claudius and kills him: the act that really does Hamlet in, that seals Claudius's decision to destroy him in order to secure Claudius's kingship and that initiates Laertes' decision to kill him in order to revenge Polonius. The combination of having fomented bloody loss and yet inspiring genuine grief cloaks Polonius's ghost after his death and unceremonious burial. As Laertes angrily reminds Claudius, his father has had “No trophy, sword, nor hatchment o'er his bones.” Since the state has tactically chosen to ignore his death, all of Polonius's memorials must be familial. One is his daughter's dirge, sung before her death. A second is his son's revenge. Like the father, the son is a negotiator, who is willing to enter into sinister schemes and who bargains with Claudius over the terms and conditions of his revenge. The third memorial is more subtle. Before her funeral, a sequence of voices marks Ophelia's drowning: that of Gertrude, then that of Laertes, and then, in a grim and comic counterpoint, those of the two clowns who are digging her grave. They imply that she will receive a Christian burial because the status-conscious coroner has found her not guilty of suicide. Her social position, which her father has worked so diligently to maintain, at last protects her.

What contemporary scenarios might one imagine for Polonius? Like pundit, scenario has become a common
A scenario both imagines a future and shows how to handle it. A scenario can be designed for a movie or a play, but more likely, it depicts what a corporation or nonprofit organization or striver might do. “Where do you want to be in five years?” a strategic planning consultant might ask a group. “What’s your scenario?” An up-to-date Polonius is easily pictured in a small, rich, arms-ridden, authoritarian country. Here families still control political power, here political violence is endemic, and here a brilliant son might return to an uncle's ascension from his more carefree days as a student at Harvard, Oxford, or the Sorbonne. Think a cognate of Iraq or Syria. Polonius could be a government official in such countries, but he could not be a pundit, because they lack the press freedoms that encourage punditry. A Polonius is also plausible if Hamlet is transposed to a family-run corporation called Denmark. This move is the controlling conceit of the visually arresting and dazzlingly ingenious movie 
Hamlet, released in 2000, which starred Ethan Hawke as the Prince. The actor Bill Murray, known for contemporary comedy, is a beautifully effective Polonius: a light-voiced, schedule-conscious, well-dressed, trusted corporate counselor, first seen vigorously applauding Claudius at a stockholders' meeting. He is a loving single parent who nevertheless places corporate interests, and his own interest in these interests, over his daughter's well-being. As Ophelia cries, he skillfully—and perhaps slightly salaciously—wires her for a conversation with the increasingly problematic and eccentric young scion Hamlet.

Neither of these scenarios takes place in a modern democracy. The question of what a Polonius might be like in a political tragedy set in a modern democracy provokes the deeper question of whether a political tragedy in a modern democracy is possible. The classical conventions of political tragedy—that alliance of the dramas of big rulers, ruling families and the state—function awkwardly for a modern democracy. Hamlet uses these conventions with Shakespearean depth. (In one way, Othello breaks them. The tragic hero is both a servant of the state, albeit a heroic general, and, as Moor of Venice, a partial outsider. In another way, however, Othello maintains them. Desdemona is no partner outsider but the daughter of a ruling family.) In contemporary America, only the myth of the Kennedys—their heroic men shot down by lesser figures—keeps the canons of political tragedy woefully alive. The Kennedys continue to fuse the fates of a compelling individual, a family, and the state. Otherwise, our political imaginations must feed on different substances.

Now fathers and sons of political families have to work hard to establish dynasties. They must go through elections, although they have the competitive advantages of fame and strong fund-raising prowess when they campaign. They must take account of the ambitions of daughters. When even the most charismatic politician achieves office, he finds power assigned throughout institutions that check and balance each other. Classical tragedy has focus and concentration. Modern democratic political tragedy has networks and sprawl. Actors mesh, connect, disconnect, and reconnect with one another. They also breathe within webs of bureaucratic institutions. Interacting with one another, interacting with their agencies, they are too mobile and yet aligned with others to be assigned individual responsibility for tragic effects on others or on the environment. Moreover, overt physical violence and shooting wars are no longer respectable political choices within national boundaries. Modern democratic politicians have found the moral equivalents of war through investigative hearings, spin doctors, negative ads, debates, and such media events as “Crossfire.” The material equivalents of the poisoned chalice and rapier have been relegated to assassins, domestic terrorists, and rogue cops.

My Polonius must operate within such a scenario. However, the loss of a clear narrative line and of a centripetal figure do not create a vacuum that he will fill. He lacks the poetry and intensity of a grand tragic figure. He would have had an excellent education, including graduate and/or professional training. He has read Shakespeare. He might have taken a joint law and business degree. He is very intelligent, and his is not entirely an instrumental intelligence. When he was young, he had a wild streak. He might have drunk too much, or smoked pot, or done both. Whatever he did, it did not mar his résumé. He or his family might have fixed a DWI ticket or two. He is now older. He has bought a country home for his retirement in a university town—perhaps in Charlottesville, or Raleigh-Durham, or Seattle. He is, however, loath to retire. He would miss the game. Moreover, his children are only in their twenties, and he still has financial obligations to them.
He likes to think of himself as a modern father, and he cares deeply for his children, and gets upset if he does not know what they are doing, especially his daughter. He tells his friends that he would like her to go to his own law school but that he is still an old-fashioned man when it comes to the young man in his girl's life. He is a widower. Before her death, of ovarian cancer, his wife did respected volunteer work in Washington, D.C. He now dates, and watches some pornographic films, but he has not married again.

Playing the game, he could belong to the moderate wing of either major political party. The actual party affiliation is irrelevant. He belongs to the permanent government, and has functioning networks. When he is in government, he is an appointed official. He has no desire to run for office. He might be a deputy assistant secretary of state, or a top staffer at the National Security Council, or a deputy director of the CIA. He lacks the gall and brass to go for the top jobs. He is proud of the way he handles his superiors—good-humored, courteous, ostensibly loyal, full of well-timed jocularity. His jobs require him to receive classified materials. He hints at the power he has because he knows secrets. He likes it when journalists use him as “a protected source,” and he is very good at leaks.

When he is not in office, he has his pick of joining a law firm, or a major corporate communications firm, or a highly prestigious think tank, particularly one that is concerned with security issues. He serves on official commissions and committees, and one or two corporate boards, and has a museum membership and theater subscription. In memory of his wife, he is on an advisory committee of a cancer research group. What he truly enjoys is being a pundit. Modernity and its communications technologies have granted him an audience a Renaissance Polonius never had. His promise to his audience is that his jobs may have forced him to do painful or deceptive things for the sake of national security, but that he will now be as truthful as the vows made during his career in national security permit him to be. Whenever there is a crisis in foreign or defense affairs, he is on TV, silver hair combed back, in a dark suit, analyzing, pontificating a little. Younger experts roll their eyes when they see him, but they might be envious of him. He declines invitations to appear on the raucous shows on Fox TV or some cable channels. He prefers the more sanitized experts of CNN or PBS or, when he is lucky, the Sunday morning talk shows. He lets it be known that he has been through crises before and knows how to manage them. He is the consummate insider. His language is utterly conventional. Members of the avant-garde are prophets, not pundits. His résumé, and his command of hearable public rhetoric, give him credibility. He often tells his son how important it is to be credible.

How does Polonius, our pundit, die? Things ought to be hunky-dory. His party is in power. He is now in the White House, at the National Security Council. The president and his family are old friends, although the president’s re-election was controversial, because he was the first to be divorced while in office. Polonius's son, having gotten his law degree and then worked for an international consulting company, is taking an extended vacation. Against his father's better judgment, he is sailing around the world. The president's second wife, an athletic woman, has told Polonius not to be an old fussbudget and let the boy go. He is, however, worried about his daughter, a fragile girl, who may be dating the president's son from his first marriage, known for being odd and wild and hard to control and more radical than his father. Polonius, however, gets caught in a bad power struggle about a major issue, and despite his affable maneuverings, he has made enemies over the years. There are leaks about both sexual harassment and possible improprieties having to do with foreign contracts; there are threats of a Congressional investigation. He is forced to resign. He misses his staff and his secretary. Although he talks to publishers about a book contract, his value as a pundit is diminished. Now we might imagine several alternative scenarios. If he knows too much, and if his enemies are unusually vengeful and vicious, he might die “accidentally”—a helicopter crash when he is visiting a foreign dignitary who still keeps in touch with him, or a mysterious stabbing on a towpath by the Potomac while he is jogging. More benignly, he might die, angry and disappointed, of a heart attack. His daughter mourns him, but she also dies soon afterward of a drug overdose. The son returns home, and must mourn both sister and father. He is convinced that one of his father's enemies hooked his sister on drugs and that all of his father's enemies conspired against him. Although he wants to resume his career and be successful, he works on a biography of his father. His girlfriend helps him. A small vanity press ultimately publishes it. It is called,
without a hint of irony, To His Own Self He Was True.

Criticism: Production Reviews: Elvis Mitchell (essay date 12 May 2000)


[In the following review of Michael Almereyda's 2000 film adaptation of Hamlet, Mitchell commends the modern setting of the film, as well as the performances of most of the actors, but suggests that actor Ethan Hawke's portrayal of Prince Hamlet lacked depth and maturity.]

“It is curious; one never thinks of attaching Hamlet to any special locale,” the critic Kenneth Tynan once wrote of Shakespeare's tragedy, and the director Michael Almereyda has brilliantly seized upon that by rooting his voluptuous and rewarding new adaptation of the play in today's Manhattan. The city's contradictions of beauty and squalor give the movie a sense of place—it makes the best use of the Guggenheim Museum you'll ever see in a film—and New York becomes a complex character in this vital and sharply intelligent film.

Mr. Almereyda contours the material to his own needs, even though he was inspired by the 1987 “Hamlet Goes Business,” a deadpan update by the renegade Finnish director Aki Kaurismaki. This Hamlet is also set in the corporate world, where Claudius (Kyle MacLachlan) has risen to the top of the Denmark Corporation.

But where Mr. Kaurismaki presented his take as a slapstick tragedy that bordered on sadism, Mr. Almereyda layers his cool-to-the-touch version with a luxuriant paranoia compounded by the constant deployment of video cameras and listening devices.

Often shaded in lush, soothing hues of blue, Hamlet exudes an intoxicating masochism in which half the cast is battling despondency and the other half has the glint of imminent insanity. As insightfully played by Diane Venora, Hamlet's mother, Gertrude, is in danger of breaking down into a fine, distraught powder from the outset. In this version, the melancholy of Hamlet (Ethan Hawke) over the death of his father is almost a state of grace; it gives him a sense of purpose that the other characters lack.

Mr. Almereyda has created a new standard for adaptations of Shakespeare, starting with an understanding of the emotional pull of the material that corresponds with its new period and setting. Hamlet's soliloquies are now interior monologues except for the “To be or not to be” speech, which he delivers in a Blockbuster video store, using the blue in the company logo and the word “Action” emblazoned on the shelves to fit in with the mood and color of the rest of the picture.

The director's rigorous trimming has a boldness and vivacity that makes this version exhilarating while leaving Shakespeare's language and intent intact. The use of colors—its palette is red, green and the aforementioned blue—is a visual manifestation of the streamlining. This movie will send shivers of happiness through audiences because it's one of the few American productions of Hamlet constructed around the rhythms of the actors, giving each scene a different pulse.

Mr. Almereyda plays to his performers' strengths, and it's awe inspiring. The truly revelatory performance comes from the ravaged dignity that Bill Murray lends Polonius, a weary, middle-aged man whose every utterance sounds like a homily he should believe in and perhaps did many years ago. Mr. Murray takes the bemused hollowness he first discovered in sketch comedy and gives it a worn, saddened undercurrent; it's what those bullying cynics he plays in comedies would be like in real life after about 20 years. The speech Polonius gives to his son, Laertes (Liev Schreiber), has a truth that Death of a Salesman can only aspire to and
certifies Mr. Murray—who's been giving fully shaped performances in bad or little-seen movies for years—as one of the finest actors currently working. “Madam, I use no art at all,” he says at one point, and it's true; he uses apparent artlessness to achieve art.

It's not just Mr. Murray and Ms. Venora who are worth watching. Mr. MacLachlan's Claudius has a hail-fellow-well-met shallowness, a blandness tinged with creeping ambition. Mr. Schreiber is all lovely Old World elegance; he uses his resonant, trained voice to find the injured quality of lines like “You wound me, sir,” and offers a classical turn in the midst of the modernity. Steve Zahn plays Rosencrantz as slacker-weasel with a blurry twang that is just what's called for here. And Karl Geary is a steadfast, affecting Horatio.

Conceptually, *Hamlet* has all the goods and then some. Oddly enough, the title character is a little lacking in complication. Mr. Hawke's laudable commitment to the project was obviously responsible for getting it made, and his feline transparency would appear to be right for a Hamlet wrestling with the urge to kill Claudius and avenge his father's death.

But this Hamlet, wearing knit caps that make him look like a lost member of the Spin Doctors, is mired in an arrested adolescence that infantilizes him. For this conception to be fully realized, Hamlet's interior monologues shouldn't so fully mirror what's going on with him outwardly; a contrast would have provided some tension. Mr. Hawke's moping slows things down too much, and a clip from a James Dean movie playing behind him emphasizes the self-pitying aspect.

Julia Stiles plays Ophelia, and this may be the first time in her brief film career that this wildly talented young actress has seemed immature. *Hamlet* exploits her youth effectively: Polonius laces up her sneakers as he addresses her. But Ms. Stiles seems too much a child and often can't get her footing as the production sprints past her. Her natural onscreen empathy does allow for several moments that get under the skin: Ophelia plunges into an azure pool, imagining her death; she's often photographed at some of the most beautiful fountains and water spouts in New York. And when distraught, she dissolves into sobs, flinging Polaroids as if they were flower petals; it's heart-rending. The scenes she has with Mr. Hawke with a conventional and definable give-and-take also serve her well.

Little of Mr. Almereyda's previous films (*Another Girl, Another Planet, Nadja*), which are often dizzy with promise, suggested that he had the technique and imagination he brings to bear here. It's incredibly satisfying to see a director grow in the ways that he has. The *Romeo and Juliet* director Baz Luhrmann fired his camera out of the barrel of a gun, and the overdirected velocity was a moviemaker's equivalent of a collection of nervous tics; Mr. Almereyda's audacity comes in problem solving, one of the true functions of a director.

Whereas Mr. Luhrmann's dazzle is all from the outside, Mr. Almereyda goes to the heart of things and has given Shakespeare a distinctively American perspective. *Hamlet* is a movie about urban isolation and the damage it causes, using corrupted wealth as a surrogate for stained royalty.

To develop the distrust and miscommunication—a contemporary spin on the Shakespearean theme of people being out of touch with their natural environments—bits of dialogue are filtered through other sources, like overheard phone conversations. Mr. Almereyda's use of technology is fascinating and well thought out; Hamlet's dead father (Sam Shepard), for example, is first glimpsed on video screens. Hamlet's “get thee to a nunnery” speech to Ophelia becomes an unrelenting tantrum; it follows her home and continues to attack her when she turns on her answering machine.

You'll also catch snatches of material out of the corner of your eye, like Jeffrey Wright's cameo as the Gravedigger singing “All Along the Watchtower,” a piece of pop music that was made for Shakespeare: “There must be some kind of way out of here, said the Joker to the Thief.”
So much of the play is pleasurably recast—like a snapshot of Fortinbras on a television screen as the Player King, now a news anchor, wraps things up—that Mr. Almereyda has created a hunger for more. In so many ways, *Hamlet* is a palpable hit, or it should be.

**Criticism: Production Reviews: Patrick Carnegy (essay date 12 May 2001)**


[Carnegy reviews Steven Pimlott's 2001 stage production of *Hamlet*, concluding that overall it was a memorable and powerful production.]

On *Hamlet*'s 400th birthday, Steven Pimlott's new production turns its harsh floodlights on a world of grey-suited courtiers and youthful dissidents. The setting, developed from the white box of Pimlott's *Richard II*, is a high-tech space for surveillance, theatrical experiment and maybe even self-discovery. Its designer, Alison Chitty, is also responsible for a radical make-over of the theatre, bringing the stage forward and stretching it across the full width of the now carpetless auditorium. Acoustics and sight-lines are greatly improved. The actors, nearer to us than ever before in a theatre originally designed to set them apart behind a frame, want us in on the action. Sam West's *Hamlet*, giving his notes to the Players seated on the floor around him, brings the houselights up and turns the troupe round to face us, showing just what he means by holding the mirror up to nature.

The reflection in this particular mirror is of a purgatory ruled by a modern presidential Claudius surrounded by identity-tagged staff who like to applaud him, and of ill-at-ease youngsters looking for a way out. Seldom, outside school and college, can the play have been put across with a more youthful, studenty feeling to it. Hamlet and Laertes are in T-shirts, anoraks and the occasional leather jacket, Ophelia is an Irish waif in an over-large jumper and denim skirt. She and Hamlet share a fondness for going barefoot but you can't imagine that there's ever been anything between them. Laertes, off on his travels with a rucksack, can barely conceal his impatient contempt as Polonius, rather oddly clutching his coffee-mug, proffers the famous advice. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are self-evidently informers from the world of suits. Hamlet didn't need to share a joint with them to know that they'd been "sent for."

In all this we're really only ever going to be interested in Hamlet himself, and Sam West has a great deal going for him. He speaks the lines with meticulous and intelligent attention to their meaning, though he sometimes chops them up and subverts the poetry, as in "It is not / nor it cannot / come to good." Each phrase, each image is probed for its sense. You can see he's trying to handle things as coolly as Horatio (who can hardly be said to handle them at all), and yet emotion and anger will keep erupting.

Their cauldron is of course the truth about the poisoning learnt from his father's Ghost. Father and son cling desperately to each other and Hamlet is left nauseated by the burden of revenge laid upon him. His relationship with Gertrude is of comparatively small account and certainly not sexual. Marty Cruickshank plays her as a woman keeping up appearances, but it is she who first sets about Hamlet in their big scene rather than the other way about. At its end you are taken aback when they take their leave of each other by politely shaking hands over Polonius's corpse. Claudius interrogates his nephew under the fierce glare of spotlights; there is yet another weirdly uncomfortable parting, with the King dismissing Hamlet to England by lifting him off the ground in a bear-hug and forcing a kiss on his lips.

Thus far you feel that Hamlet's agonising and his battles with himself are those of an impulsive immaturity rather than those of a man paralysed by the over-abundant contrarities of his thought. West seems most at home in the final act, where action is no longer quite so "sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought." He shares
not only repartee with the gravedigger but also his beer and sandwiches and, at last, the buoyancy and liberation of wit. “Alas, poor Yorick” acquires a less than sentimental significance as Hamlet and Horatio pass his skull between them like a rugby-football. In a production in which death tends to come by bullet, you are gratified that it is rounded off with an immensely exciting duel of rapiers that exploits the immense new width of the stage. Fortinbras quietly assumes control and the suits are soon applauding their new leader.

The many memorable images of Pimlott's powerful production (of a very full text) include dramatic lighting transformations, as when at the end of Act II Hamlet resolves his indecision—“the play's the thing”—and he's caught in the crossbeam of two spots as the lighting changes from the general to the theatrical. In the play scene itself the king and queen's reactions are screened as blow-ups from Horatio's home-video; the mad Ophelia threads her way through a party in which everyone seems to be drinking themselves into a lonely oblivion. There are striking characterisations, with Alan David doubling a briskly self-important Polonius with an agreeably genial Welsh gravedigger, Christopher Good improbably doubling the Ghost with Osric, and Larry Lamb outstanding as a charismatically cool and all-too-plausible Claudius. But overall this remains a distinctly chill Hamlet. Its mirror seems to be catching too many disparate reflections.

**Criticism: Production Reviews: Charles Isherwood (essay date 4 June 2001)**


[In the following review, Isherwood compares John Caird's Royal National Theater production of Hamlet to Peter Brooks's production at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, remarking that while Brooks's shortened version of the play lacked emotion, Caird's lacked credibility. Isherwood notes that although Simon Russell Beale's performance in Caird's production was conscientious, the actor was too overweight and somber to make a convincing Hamlet.]

The strongest argument in favor of Peter Brook's Hamlet, seen recently at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, may well be John Caird's Hamlet, now stopping at the same venue for a brief run at the end of a national tour.

Brook's version pared the text down to a smart, streamlined and thoroughly dry 2 1/2 hours. Caird's Hamlet, for London's Royal National Theater, is an hour longer but rarely more emotionally engaging. Life is short, even if Hamlet isn't, and I'd rather be unmoved for 2 1/2 hours than 3 1/2 hours, thank you very much.

Caird's production seems to be taking place in some dusty, disused chamber of a massive cathedral. Paul Pyant's crepuscular lighting, the most distinguished element of the design, streams in from the wings as from high Gothic windows. Choir practice is clearly mandatory here, and takes place at all hours: The sound of Latin chants drones on monotonously throughout the evening, adding to the somber, churchy atmosphere. At one point the hanging candelabras descend and swing like censers.

Designer Tim Harley also supplied the dark-hued costumes; in this atmosphere, one might easily mistake Simon Russell Beale's Hamlet, a bit on the zaftig side and clad in floor-length black, for a benevolent friar. He's first seen kneeling in thoughtful, consciously still repose, and in fact the most striking—and touching—aspect of Beale's Hamlet is his naturally and nobly pacific nature. He has an acid-laced tongue, to be sure, and Beale's impish line delivery sometimes borders colorfully on tart bitchiness, but this Hamlet's nature seems profoundly antithetical to bloody action.

Caird points up the character's reluctance to take revenge for his father's murder by supplying more than one occasion on which Hamlet sheathes a sword poised to dispatch Claudius. Like Adrian Lester's Hamlet in the
Brook production, Beale's Hamlet is a meticulously wrought performance. His Prince of Denmark is a thoughtful man who rarely raises his voice above a mild wail. As Hamlet reasons himself out of revenge, and takes us with him, the play becomes an eloquent argument against capital punishment.

But can a Hamlet of such unquestioning gentleness and prosaic human dimensions sustain the philosophical and dramatic weight of this extraordinary play? Possibly, in a production that surrounded Beale's Hamlet with similarly sensitive actors. But with Brook's Hamlet fresh in the mind, many theatergoers attending this production may find themselves consciously ticking off the extraneous patches in the text. And sadly, the rote playing of much of the rest of the cast (can it be fatigue after a long tour?) makes half the characters seem extraneous, too.

Caird's interpretation, like Brook's, is said to focus on the family tragedy of the play, pointing up the humanity of all the characters, but there aren't many dimensions to Peter McEnery's dry Claudius or Sara Kestelman's Gertrude, whose solicitousness for her son's anguish seems rather perfunctory in the early scenes. A spiritual connection to Hamlet is lacking in Cathryn Bradshaw's Ophelia, too. Peter Blythe's priggish Polonius is fairly colorless, but his gravedigger has more flavor.

For all the discrepancies in terms of textual fidelity (though both dispense with Fortinbras), Caird's and Brook's productions are, in the end, similarly lacking in affective breadth. Brook's played like a vaguely Eastern ritual, to which one paid the requisite reverent attention without actually caring one whit whether the principal players lived or died. Caird's staging also has a ritualistic flavor, albeit a Western European one; watching it is like attending several Catholic masses in a row.

**Criticism: Production Reviews: Ken Eisner (essay date 23 July 2001)**


*In the following review, Eisner describes Campbell Scott's 2001 film adaptation of Hamlet as “the most accessible … yet” and notes that Scott's pre-World War I setting suits Shakespeare's theme of decay.*

In one of the most accessible versions of *Hamlet* yet committed to film, Campbell Scott's self-helmed Great Dane is more than ever a man for our time. Falling somewhere between Kenneth Branagh's fastidious grandeur and Ethan Hawke's slouchingly colloquial take on the troubled prince, the veteran thesp—who returns to the role after several legit runs—injects considerable humor and lots of edgy anger into his screen version, which runs a reasonable three hours. Fulsome text is most notably trimmed where oedipal angle is concerned, emphasizing instead the intensely erotic connection between Blair Brown's youngish Gertrude and her new husband, the power-hungry Claudius, played by Jamey Sheridan at his steeliest.

As the eighth filmed take on the play in only a decade, Scott's *Hamlet* faces an uphill battle in finding new fans. Existing ones, however, will be fascinated by the variations he wrings out of these familiar themes, and the pic should enjoy a brief theatrical run before getting another slot with Hallmark, which last December aired its handsome production only on the small Odyssey cable network. It will probably get longest life as a video-and-disc study guide for college students, for whom it could prove almost as definitive—and far more easily digestible—than Branagh's textually complete version.

This *Hamlet*, set in the late 1800s in a crumbling seaside mansion in an unnamed place (it was shot on Long Island), gets off to a somewhat slow start with the king's ghost making a less-than-fearsome entry. The prince's own first appearance, in a black headband that makes him look like Zorro's moody assistant, is also iffy, but the pic steadily picks up steam from there. Once the play-within-the-play begins, affording Scott,
co-helmer Eric Simonson (who directed one of Scott's two stage Hamlets) and production designer Christopher Shriver a chance to show off, things never slow down. The “to be or not to be” soliloquy is particularly meaty, with Hamlet's rush to self-abnegation made literal by a failed attempt to slit his wrists.

Setting and thesps in black vests and corseted dresses bring appropriately fin-de-siecle feeling to the work, evoking the final phase of European aristocracy before WWI, with the highborn squabbling uselessly over empires already in free fall. In this context, Hamlet's lack of enthusiasm to play the royalty game becomes quite comprehensible.

What works less well is on Polonius' side of the aisle. Scott goes beyond the usual color-blind casting by making the old man's whole family black. It's an interesting conceit, both emphasizing and overriding clan differences, especially with Roscoe Lee Browne as the puffed-up, self-absorbed adviser to the new king. But his offspring aren't so effective: Lisa Gay Hamilton is too much a figure of mature rectitude to play the swooning Ophelia; as her brother, Laertes, Roger Guenveur Smith is simply too remote to be a sharply defined counterpart to the sometimes hesitant anti-hero. Smith whispers his lines when the strength of the production is chiefly how clearly and naturally everyone else delivers theirs (except for Sam Robards, who likewise flattens his lines as Fortinbras).

Michael Imperioli and Marcus Giamatti are good as Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, here seen as eye-rolling factotums that Hamlet basically wills himself to trust (momentarily), and John Benjamin Hickey makes a memorable Horatio.

Also striking is Gary DeMichele's piano-and-trumpet-centered score, which offers a kind of medieval jazz commentary on the action. Dan Gillham's lensing, which occasionally rests on the buildings' cornices and gargoyle-like adornments, is straightforward, with just enough interpretive movement to heighten the drama.

**Criticism: Production Reviews: Anita Gates (essay date 27 July 2001)**


[In the following review, Gates praises the Classical Theater of Harlem's production of Hamlet for its use of an outdoor, multi-leveled setting and its vivid costumes, but notes that the actors had a “less than flawless command of Shakespeare's language.”]

The Classical Theater of Harlem's Courtyard Theater on 141st Street is a very pleasant place to be on a summer night. And the two-year-old company, founded by Alfred Preissner and Christopher McElroen, makes excellent use of the space in its current production of Hamlet.

The ramparts scenes, including the first appearance of King Hamlet's Ghost (Adam Wade, who is commanding and ominous even when he isn't speaking a word), are played on the roof of the Harlem School of the Arts' two-story brick building, which surrounds the courtyard. The rest of the action takes place on a raised terrace on the main level, with a three-story-plus backdrop of lush green vines. And when Polonius (Dan Snow) is stabbed, he's concealed behind a bush, not an arras. Kimberly Glennon's costumes are colorful, inventive and character-enhancing, with a lively blend of influences from Denmark to Dahomey.

If the members of the company have a less than flawless command of Shakespeare's language, they're in good company. Most contemporary performers have difficulty pressing the word-by-word meanings home, but the poetry and the overall message of Hamlet come through.
In the title role, J. Kyle Manzay captures the attitude of the depressed and sullen young prince, home from school to mourn his father, furious with his mother, Gertrude, for having immediately married her dead husband's brother, Claudius. Gertrude and Claudius (Lanette Ware, whose beauty makes it easy to understand why a man would kill to have her, and Rome Neal, the artistic theater director of the Nuyorican Poets Café) can't keep their hands off each other.

Quonta Shanell Beasley plays Ophelia, the lovely young object of Hamlet's affections, as frantically insane (in much the same way Helena Bonham Carter played the role in the 1990 film version) after Hamlet rejects her. And in this production, Hamlet gets as rough with Ophelia physically as he does verbally. The production is accompanied by live drummers, who add nicely to the dramatic tension, even if they make it difficult at times to hear the actors, who are already competing with sirens, car horns and the occasional airplane overhead.

**Criticism: Themes: Donald K. Hedrick (essay date spring 1984)**


[In the following essay, Hedrick argues that *Hamlet* is both a heroic and a satiric play, and notes that in both Renaissance England and *Hamlet’s Denmark* satire is used by the powerless to undermine the unscrupulous acts of the powerful.]

I shall begin by quarreling with a formulation by R. A. Foakes that has an unassuming and unprovocative appearance, namely that *Hamlet* is “basically an heroic tragedy … in spite of the elements of satire.” What I take exception to is not the view of the play as heroic rather than “dark,” but the phrase “despite the satire,” which implies that satiric and heroic characterization, satiric and heroic temperaments, are essentially incompatible. I wish here to offer historical, literary, and theoretical evidence to the contrary, providing an examination of the special connection between the satiric and the heroic. The satiric and heroic temperaments, and by extension their corresponding literary modes, as I hope to show, are connected in a special way. They are compatible or structurally interdependent but not reducible to a common element. The connection between them to be found in *Hamlet* derives ultimately, I believe, from a historical dialectic of power and powerlessness within the Renaissance imagination. And I am persuaded, further, that a recognition of this connection and this dialectic has implications for the general issue of character consistency in Shakespeare.

There are probably many reasons why the satiric-heroic link in *Hamlet* has been insufficiently explored. I do not intend to examine them exhaustively here, though such an examination might be an instructive means of showing that the more solid a critical opinion is, the more solid an obstacle it tends to become for later researchers traveling along the same lines of inquiry. Such an examination might also reveal some of the distortions that arise when analyses of literary works are limited to merely literary categories, such as satire and tragedy. For the present, however, I am content to offer only a brief chronicle of relevant critical moments, hoping that these will suffice as introduction to an interpretive problem in character consistency.

The story spans a century of criticism from 1880 on, with stops at 1906, 1943, and 1959. It begins with Swinburne's essays on Shakespeare, where we find the assertion that Hamlet is “almost more of a satirist than a philosopher.” Then, at the turn of the century, in a study of the dramatic tradition of the Elizabethan satiric persona by the arch-conventionalist E. E. Stoll, we find the thesis implicit in the title of an influential article: “Shakespeare, Marston and the Malcontent Type.” Next, in 1943, we find O. J. Campbell drawing parallels between *Hamlet* and the conventions of comical satire, noting (1) Hamlet's tendency to turn to the “familiar
weapons of the mocking satirist,” (2) Hamlet's sex nausea, corresponding to that of Marston's scourge, and (3) Hamlet's satiric discourse, attacking old age, women, lust, flatterers, the age, would-be gentlemen, and even human life itself.² By Campbell's time, while not considered to be a part of the satiric tradition proper, *Hamlet* is nevertheless considered to be indebted to that tradition.

Then, finally, in his full treatment of the genre of satire, in 1959, we find Alvin Kernan stressing parallels between the blood-revenger's sword and poison and the satirist-surgeon's probe and medicine.⁶ Kernan finds other parallels to the satiric tradition in *Hamlet's* role as “scourge and minister,” in *Hamlet's* reading of the “satirical rogue” (Juvenal), in the compared portraits of Old Hamlet and Claudius, and in *Hamlet's* mocking exchanges in the graveyard. But Kernan cuts his analysis short because *Hamlet* seems to him to be a figure of atypically heroic stature, too sensitive and complex for satire proper. He is, in a word, tragic. As such, this satirist is not the deformed type that Kernan's approach, implicit in his title *The Cankered Muse*, happens to emphasize.

The unintended consequence of this line of argument, it seems to me, is to short-circuit a useful inquiry into *Hamlet* as a figure in whom satiric and heroic elements reside in complementary relation. The description of the Prince that I wish to propose is one that is not radically new, but one that has thus far remained submerged in some mistaken assumptions underlying earlier critical studies. I believe that we have given undue attention to the “deformed” side of the satirist, owing to the widespread assumption that the satiric role is inappropriate for a hero. And I believe that that assumption, in turn, has led to the mistaken view that if the heroic is present in a play like *Hamlet*, it is present “in spite of the satire.”

That the satiric and the heroic need not be considered mutually exclusive can be argued from evidence in three areas: (1) satiric tradition, (2) didactic and dramatic traditions involving princely exemplars whose satiric attitudes are either accepted or endorsed, and (3) the ubiquitous Elizabethan material about Alexander the Great and Diogenes the Cynic.

For analysis of the pertinence of these areas to *Hamlet*, I must also introduce two principles or “audience strategies” not confined to literary categories: (1) a principle of the courtly aesthetics of disguise, with particular bearing on the dialectic of power and powerlessness,⁷ a principle which I term “translucency”; and (2) that same principle adapted to the field of characterization, and manifest in figures that I term “enantiomorphous.” Alexander and Diogenes, the paired figures who provide the paradigm for the characterization of *Hamlet*, are enantiomorphous figures: that is, they are left and right-handed versions of one another, having the same shape, even though they are not superposable. Such pairs can be thought of as characters whose makeup, though not their behavior, is the same.⁸

II

Power, as Robert Elliott has instructed us,⁹ is the object to which Elizabethan verse-satire dedicates itself. What this means is that satire seeks power both over the reader and over the objects of rebuke. As the embodiment of such power, the satiric persona is often portrayed as a heroic pugilist, a soldier wielding satiric words as his sword, whip, or dagger. The ideal image of the satirist is, as Maynard Mack notes, “the Stoic vir bonus, the good plain man.”¹⁰ In order to rebuke the vices in others, the conveyer of invective must himself be unspotted. Puttenham has this principle in mind when he traces the origins of satire to virtuous poets—poets who are very different from the deformed satirist that we see, for instance, in Marston's *Scourge of Villainie*.

A common theme among Renaissance satirists is the virtue of magnanimity, a term that should be construed as right power and self-confidence, necessarily conjoined to a restraint of that power. A typical instance of satire's appropriation of magnanimity is illustrated by Jonson's assurance that he could make his readers hang themselves if he chose to.¹¹ Such a posture with respect to power, one should notice, is fully compatible with aristocratic disdain. But this kind of self-assurance has the potential of coming across as self-righteousness in
dramatic representation, so Shakespeare punctuates the satiric comments of Hamlet with a pattern of self-deprecatory comments. Hamlet's self-satire makes him seem less tyrannical than unrelieved invective would make him appear, and in doing so it legitimizes his function as heroic satirist. When Hamlet brutally turns on himself, saying “but yet I could accuse me of such things that it were better my mother had not borne me” (III.i.122-24), we are reminded that he is not deluded into thinking himself faultless, and that his disdain need not be self-serving.

Now, just as noble temperament was considered fitting in a satirist, so satiric or ironic temperament was considered fitting in a prince—an idea expressed in a number of Renaissance works promoting self-development. In Castiglione, for instance, the satiric vein is presented as an attribute of the classical rulers and philosophers who are upheld as exemplars of virtue, men of “noble courage.” As Castiglione puts it, “the kinde of jeasting that is somewhat grounded upon scoffing seemeth verie meete for great men.”

Similarly, in The Education of a Christian Prince, Erasmus recommends the cynical temperament as exemplified by Diogenes, whom Erasmus admires as a “philosophic spirit … proud, unbroken, unconquered.” That encomium is significantly situated after Erasmus' exemplum of Diogenes' noble impudence to Alexander—the incident in which the prickly philosopher, having been offered anything he wants from Alexander, replies by asking Alexander to move out of his sunlight.

As Hamlet impudently retorts to Claudius about how the Prince is “too much in the sun,” Shakespeare may be offering us a glancing allusion to this famous retort, this response of the powerless to the powerful. Nor should we overlook the figure of Faulconbridge in King John. Faulconbridge, generally taken to be the satirist figure of that play, is the character most inherently noble and, by implication, most capable of ruling. Significantly, the Queen speaks of discovering in him “the very spirit of Plantagenet!” (I.i.167), and not in any lofty or superior bearing he exhibits, but rather in his carefree joking about his own illegitimacy. And finally, in another piece of contemporaneous evidence, the protagonist of Marston's Antonio's Revenge is told that, if he is forced into disguise, he ought at least to play the role of a malcontent or a satirist. Either of those roles would be more noble or “elate” than that of a fool:

Fie, 'tis unsuiting to your elate spirit.
Rather put on some trans-shap'd cavalier,
Some habit of a spitting critic, whose mouth
Voids nothing but gentle and unvulgar
Rheum of censure. ...(15)

Through his own style of madness (however feigned or real we take it to be), Hamlet makes apparent the “elate” quality of his own mind, even when that “noble mind” is “o'erthrown.” His unquenchable scoffing appears as an impresa of, not a contradiction to, his heroic spirit.

The third kind of literary evidence for the interlacing of the satiric and the heroic, and for the conjunction of the two in a single character in Shakespeare's play, is the abundance of Elizabethan literary lore about Diogenes, a Cynic who is usually paired with Alexander. Diogenes appears regularly in Elizabethan-Jacobean verse-satires, where occasionally, as in Marston's “Cynicke Satyre,” he is himself a satiric persona. John Lievsay has collected for us a number of the relevant popular Diogenes legends, many of which are echoed in the moments of satiric improvisation that resonate throughout Hamlet.

As everyone knows, Diogenes carried a lantern about Athens in broad daylight, telling all observers that he was in search of an honest man. Honesty is Hamlet's highest value as well, and he often seems engaged in an equivalent search, either for exemplars of honesty or for the meaning of honesty. We recall his test of Ophelia's “honesty” (III.i); his ironic line to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern that he will speak to them “like an honest man” (II.ii.265), which occurs in the very scene where he directly confronts them about their reasons for coming to Elsinore; and the Polonius-like sententia he directs to Polonius: “Ay, sir. To be honest, as this world goes, is to be one man picked out of ten thousand” (II.ii.178).
Diogenes, dramatizing both his independence from society and his self-sufficiency, lived outside of Athens in a tub or barrel; and so he was represented pictorially in the Renaissance. Hamlet, to dramatize his lack of ambition, tells Rosencrantz and Guildenstern that he could live in a nutshell and “count myself a king of infinite space” (II.ii.252). But Diogenes has an ambition peculiar to himself, an ambition that signifies his status as repressed ruler. Shakespeare and his audience may have recalled the incident when Diogenes is captured and sold into slavery. To a prospective buyer, who asks him what he is good at, Diogenes responds curtly, “I govern men.” At a moment of utter powerlessness, Diogenes asserts a claim to absolute power. His comment, and others like it, embodies the structural interdependence of master and slave, the powerful and the powerless.17

The enantiomorphous relation between satirist and prince is especially pronounced in works that pair Diogenes with Alexander. The reversibility of their roles is implied in Alexander's famous dictum, “If I were not Alexander, I would be Diogenes”—a provocative statement deconstructing their differences. In some versions of Diogenes' life, the two men are even said to have died on the same day. John Lyly portrays them both in Campaspe (1584), where they help him explore the theme of true kingliness, a theme usually present in Renaissance representations of the powerful.18 In many of the literary treatments of Diogenes, the philosopher is depicted as a ruler out of work. As such, he functions as a check to kings, just as Hamlet acts as check to Claudius, who is the very reason that the Prince is only a prince. In a Jacobean life of Diogenes written by William Stafford, the philosopher is even said to exceed Alexander in Alexander's characteristic virtue—magnanimity.19 This Aristotelian virtue would seem to be least available to powerless figures such as Diogenes. But as it happens, the marginalized philosopher signals the potential for such powerlessness to assume a privileged position over power.

As a ruler out of work, Diogenes thus provides a functional model for Hamlet, who encompasses within himself the Diogenes/Alexander paradigm.20 In Hamlet, of course, Shakespeare had the advantage of a plot in which the ruler was literally out of work: Claudius having popped in between the election and Hamlet's hopes, the Prince is permitted the luxury of becoming Diogenian by circumstances, a role he relishes immensely.

We find the resonance, if not the actual influence, of the Diogenes/Alexander or satiric/heroic paradigm throughout the play. First we see that Hamlet's scorn of flattery is everywhere matched by his “free speech”—“free” here in the double sense of openly satiric as well as noble. (Hamlet's sustained and intelligent insolence to illegitimate authority is equaled only by his deep admiration of the rare honesty of a Horatio.) When Hamlet makes comparisons to Hercules, he is citing the hero who was considered by Cynic philosophers to be the highest embodiment of virtue. And, then finally, in the graveyard scene, when Hamlet seems most Hamlet-like, he leaps across time to scoff once more at Alexander and Alexander's conclusion in dust: “Dost thou think Alexander looked o’ this fashion i’th’ earth?” For a moment Hamlet is transformed into the historical Diogenes. Even his diction takes on a lower-class intonation. Language can itself become a translucent disguise when Hamlet's high, heroic style is obscured by common style.

III

The conflation of complementary but non-identical roles in Hamlet (here satirist-scourge and prince-minister) is in keeping with a more general aesthetic principle in Elizabethan drama and spectacle, a principle that may have evolved from conventions of disguise in the tradition of the masque. This tradition culminates in plays such as Hamlet and The Malcontent. (I argue elsewhere that The Malcontent portrays a comparably disguised ruler who is less psychologically refined than Hamlet.21) Although the principle of decorum governing masques and other entertainments required dramatic roles that members of royalty could play without ceasing to be royal,22 there was a different decorum, a counter-decorum, allowing even rulers to “ungrace” themselves on occasion by donning less than noble disguises—as long as those disguises only partly concealed their nobility.
This composite audience strategy for “ungracing” I term translucency. For a typical instance of translucency, we may note the stylized shepherd's costume worn by Henry VIII in a court entertainment during his reign. In its materials—“fine clothe of gold and fine crimson satin paned,”23 with beards made out of gold wire, silver, or black silk for all the gentlemen—we have a socially symbolic gesture in which the elegance of the materials deliberately contradicts the social station depicted, thus offsetting a potential breach of decorum. Or, we might consider Jonson's Masque of Blackness, for which Queen Anne and her entourage chose to paint themselves in blackface, but with refined costumes and jewelry that were explicitly intended to contrast with dark skin color.

Men of lower social rank could “ungrace” themselves more fully in royal spectacle, without the requirement of translucency. This was the case when hundreds of French merchants, seamen, and adventurers dressed themselves as Brazilian Indians to inhabit a mock-village built for the royal entry of Henri II into Rouen in 1550. (Although not translucent, the pageant was nevertheless a composite spectacle,24 since fifty real Indians were imported to make the village seem more convincing.)

A translucent disguise must combine discrepancy with identity, as does the combination of roles depicted in the prince-satirist. In a passage that calls for fuller historical explication by students of Continental masquing, Castiglione analyzes the convention of discrepant role-playing in masques, noting that “It is no noveltie at all to any man for a prince to be a prince.”25 Castiglione goes on to analyze the aesthetics of power-effacement, the technique permitting a gentleman to debase himself physically or socially. As in the English examples, the licensed debasement described by Castiglione requires a disguise that is only partial—that is, a costume that is translucent. As such, the costume will act on spectators in two ways, simultaneously signifying both authority and authority's absence. Thus, to take Castiglione's example, a young man may disguise himself in an old man's attire, but only in such a manner that his garments are not “a hindrance to him to show his nimbleness of person.” The power of agility, abstracted from its usual context, is thus emphasized. The point of the practice is twofold. First, the admiration of the spectators is to be increased: “… when they behold afterwarde a far greater matter to come of it than they looked for under that attire, it delyteth them.” And second, a prince by this means can display his innate worth: he can prove that his stature is not simply the result of his having a title. In Castiglione's terms, “… in this point the prince stripping himselfe of the person of a prince … let him challenge a greater superioritie, namely, to passe other men, not in authoritie, but in vertue, and declare that the prowesse is not encreased by his being a prince.” The final result, in other words, is a legitimation of “authoritie,” through an authorized debasement that upholds it.

Two examples from Thomas Nashe's The Unfortunate Traveller provide important variants on this practice.26 In one of them, a St. Paul's Day pageant at Rome, the parade includes cripples and deformed people who are, apparently without grotesque intent, dressed up in extravagantly fine costumes—a translucency that inverts the convention by showing baseness through magnificence instead of magnificence through baseness. The other is a suggestion made by the narrator that a wealthy nobleman should dress in humble and plain clothes for a public appearance, but should at the same time be accompanied by a retainer who dresses richly. Once again we find a composite spectacle that provides the requisite discrepancy for an audience strategy of translucency, whose purpose here is to reveal both wealth and true nobility. Through a complicated system of different levels of representation, the device operates through a tripartite structure of signs: (1) the nobleman's magnificence in reality (i.e.; his authority in wealth and honor); (2) the effacement of those signs on his person for this occasion; and (3) those signs displaced here to the man who accompanies him. In this representational system, the well-dressed retainer is, in brief, the nobleman's true clothing. Innate worth is thereby culturally reproduced.

Such instances of the rhetoric of spectating lead us into the sphere of Renaissance politics, where we find the same careful appropriation and reconstruction of the images of power. That these strategies of legitimation were deeply ingrained in the political unconscious of Elizabethan England is evident from a retrospective analysis of Elizabeth's reign by Francis Bacon, who astutely observes what I have termed “discrepancy” in the
situation of a woman in power over a manly state. Here is another structurally composite spectacle, maintained not for the duration of a single pageant but throughout an entire reign—a spectacle in which a peaceful woman is surrounded by pugnacious subjects who are said to have a “genius for war”:

… I think it very material to reflect over what sort of people she bore the sway, for had her government been over the Palmyrenians, or any other soft and unmanly nation of Asia, it had been a less wonder, since a female in the throne would be suitable enough to an effeminate people, but to have all things move and be directed by a woman's nod in England, a nation so fierce and warlike; this, I say, justly raises our highest admiration.27

Here the political effect is shown to be the result of a spectating effect, as indicated by the terms Bacon uses: “wonder” and “admiration.”

The aesthetics of courtly, political spectating are validated in Hamlet by Shakespeare's dramatization of circumstances that offer Alexander a chance to be Diogenes. The aesthetics of disguise become the principle of characterization. As Hamlet alternates scene by scene and line by line between the enantiomorphous roles of hero and satirist, he demonstrates his potential for legitimate rule. The audience is thus prepared to credit Fortinbras' conclusion, at the end of the play, that Hamlet “was likely, had he been put on, / To have proved most royal” (V.ii.386-87). But this display of princely legitimacy legitimizes in turn the actor who plays Hamlet. For the alternation of roles within a single part corresponds exactly to an Elizabethan actor's alternation of roles when he must double parts. Thus, our gratitude to Shakespeare for Hamlet is a gratitude to the peculiar Elizabethan theatrical pressure for spectacular, tour de force doubling of parts by the worthiest actors, who thereby prove their worth.

IV

My intention in considering Hamlet in these terms is not so much to press the case for his heroism, an often defended though arguable position, nor to catalogue every possibly satiric element in his characterization, though such elements deserve further study.28 Rather, I wish to explore old territory from the new perspective provided by a theoretical framework (1) that takes into account the rhetoric of Renaissance spectating, and (2) that employs a structural approach to character inconsistency. The rhetorical and structural analysis of character that I here employ suggests a corresponding link between satiric and heroic literature. And it therefore seems appropriate that the form of heroic action for Hamlet turns out to be a dramatic enactment of the structure of satire.

Translated into drama, verse-satire becomes a plot of exposure or dishumouring. To achieve such exposure, Hamlet is motivated more to deflate than to blood-let.29 Though by no means afraid of blood, action, or violence, he is nevertheless, to vary Swinburne's insight, more of a satirist than a revenger. When he reacts to the Ghost's revelation by crying out “O my prophetic soul!” we see the appropriate response of a satirist whose occupational hunches have just been confirmed. When he engages himself in devising the mousetrap, his sensibility is pointedly that of a satirist, for whom revenge is attractive only insofar as it is also exposure. His plan is heavily informed by satiric tradition: it relies on a traditional notion of the power of satire's “mirror” (i.e., the imitation of personal vices) to make the conscience of the victim reveal his crimes. Hamlet's is also a satirist's sensibility when he recalls hearing that “guilty creatures sitting at a play / Have by the very cunning of the scene / Been struck so to the soul that presently / They have proclaimed their malefactions” (II.ii.575-78). And his strategy in devising the playlet depends upon the traditional satiric ideal of personal “application”—a theory that both legitimizes and makes dangerous any use of invective (“we that have free souls, it touches us not”—[III.ii.233]).

But the plan is radically idealistic. After all, no one in Shakespeare's audience is proclaiming his malefactions upon seeing Hamlet. And Hamlet's excitement at having cholered Claudius tends to obscure the failure of his
strictly satirical intention: Claudius does not, in fact, confess. Nor does he have to be played as violent in his reaction; the signals he gives may well be either ambiguous or readable only to Hamlet. Hamlet's sense of his satiric function nonetheless explains his complete satisfaction afterwards: as an agent of dishumouring he has fulfilled his aims completely and needs no immediate strategy for further revenge. Thus, when he responds to Guildenstern, “For me to put him to his purgation would perhaps plunge him into more choler” (III.ii.293-94), we should see that his mind is limited solely to a consideration of satiric effect. As satirist, his point has been to transform (here, medically transform) his victim, and in that he has succeeded.

V

If we accept the view that Hamlet up to this point is motivated more to expose than to kill, I believe that we are relieved of some of the pressure to account for his “indecision.” Of course, Hamlet's preoccupation with satiric activity, with commentary and deflation, can be seen as a preoccupation that keeps him from the completion of his ultimate task, a preoccupation that cripples other activity. But to argue that Hamlet is too satiric to act would be to approach the generally discarded nineteenth-century argument that he is too philosophical or ethereal to act. I want to resist reviving in any version the old argument, since that argument itself rests heavily on the assumption I wish to challenge here—that the satiric and the heroic are at odds. The old argument depends on an overly narrow notion of heroism as something that consists only of the performance of great actions. The heroism of Hamlet, surely, is a heroism of the spirit, evident throughout the play in his loyalty, energy, integrity, passion for truth, and contempt for all nontheatrical forms of dishonesty. With its contrastingly easy revenger Laertes (not to mention the possibility that it embodies Christian reservations about revenge), Hamlet resists such a narrow notion of heroism. Instead, it depicts a heroism available even to the powerless—indeed perhaps most available to the powerless.

Of course, Hamlet's satiric temperament might be seen as contributing in the long run toward revenge proper, in that it enables him to distinguish friend from foe—testing, identifying, and marking his enemies. But what the satiric elements do for the play as a whole is to contribute to the revenge tradition by redefining or making problematic revenge itself. If, as I contend, Shakespeare is consciously exploring the satiric-heroic paradigm in Hamlet, then Hamlet's satiric action, in demonstrating and producing guilt, is itself appropriately heroic. If an enantiomorphous conjunction is at work in the play, then my argument refines G. B. Harrison's well-known assertion that the famous “delay” of the play does not in fact exist. Harrison argued that there is no real delay in Hamlet, since Hamlet must first test the Ghost's veracity and since afterwards he lacks adequate opportunity to carry out the assassination.30 I would argue that Hamlet does not delay revenging because he is never not revenging.

In my view, Hamlet is engaged in revenge even before he knows it, in the early speeches of the play when he does not know Claudius' actual criminality. When Hamlet describes the signs of mourning as “actions that a man might play” (I.ii.84), he is in the occupational position of most satirists with respect to their audiences. The private crimes of the satirist's listeners, like Claudius' crimes here, are lashed unawares. The satirist produces free-floating critiques that can strike anyone on whom they stick or “apply”; and the audience does not require any particularizing intention for the satirist's efforts to be effective. The action of Hamlet thus becomes a sustained satiric siege on the conscience of Claudius, leading up to his anguish and despair in the Prayer Scene, where, as in satire, guilt and desire for reform are the goals of the dramatist (in this case Hamlet). By enlarging the idea of “revenge” to include satiric-heroic characterization, Shakespeare effects an ingenious innovation in the genre: he grafts the guilt-preoccupation of satire onto the passion-preoccupation of revenge tragedy. Hamlet's satire is thus a kind of revenge, just as his revenge will be a kind of satire.

VI

Hamlet's relations with other characters are thoroughly informed by satiric-heroic action and style. Again and again he exposes people for what they are. In doing so he delights in the formal pattern, so often repeated in
this play, of the trickster tricked.\textsuperscript{31} His baiting of Polonius culminates in a “deflation” through death, for which Hamlet improvises a satiric epitaph on Polonius' transformation from busybody to mere body: “this counsellor / Is now most still, most secret, and most grave, / Who was in life a foolish prating knave” (III.iv.214-16). Despite its irony about the victim's “reformation,” we nonetheless observe in this epitaph the genuine reformist intent of Renaissance satire. Hamlet shows the same intent in a moment apart from the revenge plot, when he calls for the players to “reform altogether” their acting style (III.ii.36). He prescribes their dramatic reforms in the same detailed way that he will later prescribe to his mother her sexual reforms.

In the Closet Scene, moreover, the satiric function overrides the heroic. Hamlet forgets or deliberately violates the Ghost's injunction to leave his mother to heaven and to those “thorns that in her bosom lodge / To prick and sting her” (I.v.87-88), a phrase employing verse-satire's motif of thorns or nettles as metaphors for the satiric pen. But to leave someone entirely to his own conscience is to negate the entire enterprise of satire. Hamlet must effect reform, and against his mother he must use the imagery typical of satire. He uses language as physical magic, to “speak daggers to her, but use none” (III.ii.381). When the daggers are spoken, the sexual nausea of Hamlet's language calls to mind that of the harshest verse-satire. Combining the purposes of exposure and self-reform, Hamlet chooses for a key metaphor the traditional mirror of satire: “You go not till I set you up a glass / Where you may see the inmost part of you” (III.iv.20-21). Gertrude validates this metaphor when she pleads for him to stop: “Thou turn'st mine eyes into my very soul, / And there I see such black and grained spots / As will not leave their tinct” (III.iv.90-92). This is the mirror of Gascoigne's satiric Stele Glas, whose title signifies the counterpart of the crystal glass that flatters. The play's satiric and heroic elements become explicitly conjoined when these “mirrors” are transformed into literal portraits in the same scene. At this point, when Hamlet holds up the miniature paintings, his uncle's portrait is read satirically, his father's heroically.

The satiric and heroic also unite at other key moments. In the violent scene at Ophelia's graveside, Hamlet modulates from the one into the other as his heroic challenge to Laertes evolves into a boasting contest about how much more Hamlet loved Ophelia than did her brother. As he immerses himself in competitive sorrow, Hamlet's boasts partake both of heroic expressiveness and of a comic parody of such beef-witted warriors' boasts: “Woo't fast? woo't tear thyself? / Woo't drink up esill? eat a crocodile? / I'll do't” (V.i.261-64). Here again we sense a shift to the linguistic intonations of the lower class, a shift that serves as another translucent disguise. Such rapid shifts from heroic to satiric modes—so rapid as to explain the dazzled faculties of those who would try to grasp Hamlet's dominant role—account for the linguistic, stylistic, and tonal mixtures within the play.\textsuperscript{32} The effect is paradoxical here, for Hamlet mocks heroic boasts even as he utters them himself: “Forty thousand brothers / Could not with all their quantity of love / Make up my sum” (V.i.256 ff.) His self-parody retraces the steps of his own passionate earnestness, as if he were holding himself back from excessive emotion even in the process of feeling it.

\textbf{VII}

But if we see in this language the doubleness of satirist and prince, the tonal shift also becomes typical of dialogue throughout the play. Hamlet shifts between mockery and magnanimity in his dealings with Polonius, whom he derides until he tells the players, “Follow that lord, and look you mock him not” (II.ii.529). The players themselves are cordially welcomed and praised, but later they receive Hamlet's biting professional critique. All mankind (satire's ultimate object) undergoes a shift from “angel” to “dust” when Hamlet meditates on that “piece of work,” man (II.ii.300 ff.) And Hamlet castigates mankind again when he responds to Polonius, “Use every man after his desert, and who shall scape whipping?” (II.ii.516). When he follows this question with the directive “Use them after your own honor and dignity,” he has shifted from a satiric view of man's potential to a heroic one, in a modulation that once again is almost too quick to grasp.

The most spectacular of Hamlet's satiric-heroic modulations occurs in the graveyard scene, where the complementary roles of Alexander and Diogenes are opalescent. We see Hamlet the Prince mocking or
meditating upon jesters (Yorick), while Hamlet the satirist mocks or meditates upon princes (Alexander the Great and Caesar, who are reduced to dust and to stopping a bunghole in a barrel). He speaks as prince to the Diogenian gravedigger, but as satirist to the Alexandrian Horatio. The scene thus formally reproduces Hamlet's soliloquies elsewhere in the play, suggesting that they are not merely soliloquies but internal conversations between prince and satirist.

Even the Prayer Scene is charged with the satiric and heroic in a compatible mixture. If we take Hamlet at his word when he gives his reasons for not killing Claudius, then he is once again in the occupational position of the satirist; that is, he restrains his power in order the better to expose vice. In doing so he conflates heroic magnanimity with satiric magnanimity—the latter as the conventional satiric disdain uttered by satiric personae who boast about what they could do to their objects of attack, even to the extent of killing them with satiric pens. The rationale Hamlet adopts here is exactly suited to the ways of satire: by waiting for a more opportune moment, Hamlet will expose and deflate the King during what Hamlet feels is the King's most characteristic behavior, some act that will indelibly taint him, some act that has “no relish of salvation in it.” Like a satirist, Hamlet will thus mold Claudius into a story (or, rather, the Renaissance genre of a character, or typical instance of vice), just as Hamlet tends to mold stories out of everyone he encounters. His plan, as he says, is to “trip him, that his heels may kick at heaven, / And that his soul may be as damned and black / As hell, whereto it goes” (III.iii.93-95). Through his choice of words, Hamlet shows that he envisions for Claudius a final satiric dishumouring, a pratfall of damnation.

Ultimately, heroic revenge and satiric exposure are both successful in Hamlet. Conjunction of the two modes of action is delayed until the complementary patterns fully conjoin—that is, when the princely and the satiric acts are most spectacular. Earlier in the play, by contrast, we have only seen opportunities for exposure without revenge, or for revenge without exposure. The spectacle of heroic revenge in the final scene is neatly balanced, moreover, by the non-heroic exposure of the foppish courtier Osric in the preceding scene, where we have a final reminder of the play's debt to satire. In Osric, Shakespeare introduces a satiric character who makes this ignoble world worth the leave-taking, one whom the “drossy age dotes on” and whom Hamlet will mirror in gestural parody and parodic speech. Osric is a translucent, landowner version of the landdigger Clown from the graveyard scene. This comparison—especially pronounced if the opposite roles happen to have been doubled by the same actor in Shakespeare's company—extends to their functions in action and in language. In action they are, respectively, an agent of the grave and an agent of the deathtrap into which Hamlet jumps. In language they are both at the margins of discourse: the one in competitive equivocation, the other in fawning equivocation. In social terms, they represent a legitimacy of the powerless, and an illegitimate power.

The juxtaposition of the last two scenes of Hamlet constitutes a final modulation of satiric to heroic, dependent on the complementary paradigm I have argued here. In a tragic repetition of the comic exposure of Osric, Hamlet will become the efficient agent of the revelation of other characters' natures—Laertes', Gertrude's, Claudius', and Horatio's. These revelations confer on the final scene a dazzling succession of moral episodes, Osric omitted. In effect, Hamlet writes their “characters” for the audience's memory. Conscious of this function, he will devote his final energies to what on the one hand is a conventionally heroic action—keeping his loyal friend Horatio alive. But that same action serves a complementary satiric function in insuring that the villainy Hamlet has brought to light (for the sake of the confused bystanders and for history) is universally published. But of course punishment is, as always, insufficient. As satirist and hero, Hamlet both publishes and perishes, with Horatio as his book and comrade.

VIII

Alexandrian magnanimity, as we have seen, is the particular virtue that links satirist and prince, the enantiomorphous roles which in Hamlet are conflated in the strategically interlaced dramatic functions of a single character. In keeping with Castiglione's notion of the decorum of disguise, Shakespeare creates a
delightful discrepancy through the spectacle of a prince not being exactly a prince. Moreover, he creates a
credibly heroic, legitimized prince through the particular choice of a masking temperament, having discovered
that the good prince must be a repressed satirist, the good satirist a repressed prince. The play is therefore
“basically heroic,” as I concurred at the beginning, but it becomes so not despite its satire but through its
satire. Satire is intrinsic to its design.

At stake theoretically in this reading of an “enantiomorphic Hamlet,” as I suggested earlier, is our
interpretive apparatus for describing characterization. I would hope that in examining Shakespearean
ccharacters we can now begin to go beyond customary models of “influence” or “character type,” although the
present methodology, drawing as it does on traditional materials in literary and theatrical history, does not
invalidate those models. What I have tried to demonstrate is how a character in Shakespeare may be studied as
an entity whose opposing or inconsistent elements are in a special, functional relationship to one another, in a
struggle for power and legitimacy. The linguistic counterpart to this approach to characterization is Bakhtin's
idea of dialogism, or competitive elements that inhabit a single discourse in productive violation of unity. Through the present approach we can see Hamlet's character more as a mixture than as a type. Or, to carry the
logic further, we can see him more as a complex system than as a mixture. Hamlet is, to adapt a traditional
aesthetic notion, his own “foil,” whether as prince or as satirist. (“Foil,” however, is a concept less precise
than what is needed, since it fails to denote shared features within opposed types.) As we trace the complex
knot of Hamlet's inconsistencies through this interpretive strategy, we might do well to keep in mind two
statements of Montaigne's: that Montaigne may contradict himself, but he never contradicts the truth; and that
human beings may be fundamentally double-souled, thus accounting for their characteristic inconstancy.

Through his invention of the “system” we know as Hamlet, Shakespeare has produced a rhetorical/aesthetic
strategy that makes capital out of inconsistency. As an audience strategy that engages and involves us in this
inconsistency, Shakespeare's invention reproduces in us the furor poeticus usually attributed to artistic
creation rather than to spectating and interpreting. The play's durability, then, is in part a function of that
strategy, whereby artistic power, or a feeling of artistic power, is transferred to an otherwise powerless
audience. But surely the case of Hamlet is not unique. Notwithstanding today's prevalent practice of hunting
for “unity” within characters, I am persuaded that we only attend to Shakespearean characters, even minor
ones, to the extent that they are inconsistent.

To interpret the Hamlet “system” thus structurally is, I believe, to unfold other areas for future inquiry with
respect to theme, action, and relations between characters. The present study necessarily stops short of
exploring these ramifications. With respect to the theme of power, for instance, the two competing but
complementary natures within a single protagonist translate into a dual, political representation of (1) the
princely exercise of power, and (2) the satiric exorcism of power. In this play, the powerless power of the
prince is upheld or legitimized by the powerful powerlessness of the satirist, in a political rhetoric of partially
effaced power. Audience strategies for spectating, such as translucent disguise and enantiomorphic
characterization, support the resulting spectacle of legitimacy. An understanding of such strategies and of they
way in which they become politically charged could contribute to a developing “poetics of culture” for the
study of Renaissance history.

Of course, a claim to have plucked out any of Hamlet's character may be taken as interpretive hubris.
Anticipating the charge, I can only note in conclusion a typical institutional pattern of experience for the
changing interpretations of some work: accounting for a mystery at one level of description only manages to
transfer the mystery to other levels of description. What makes an Alexander want to be a Diogenes, for
instance, is a mystery still. What makes humans, through contradictory images, aspire to an expanding freedom
of imagination and spirit and style is another.

Notes

2. To leap into the broadest and deepest of pits—the critical issue of Hamlet's character—may seem a presumptuous enterprise at this point in the history of criticism. But I am hopeful that in this, as in life, indiscretion may sometimes serve well and analysis may proceed without becoming limed in every debate about the play. The contradictions of Hamlet's character are a critical commonplace, and the current trend seems to be to acknowledge plural sides to Hamlet, as in Larry Champion's *Shakespeare's Tragic Perspective* (Athens: Univ. of Georgia Press, 1976), p. 117 et passim. I find two other sources that point in the direction of my interpretation. Erich Auerbach notes Shakespeare's increasing practice in tragedy of mixing styles within the tragic personage himself, in *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1953), pp. 315-16. And Inga-Stina Ewbank describes the incongruity within the first court scene of the play by remarking that it seems as if a Jonsonian Masque and a satire were being simultaneously performed. See her "Hamlet and the Power of Words," *Shakespeare Survey*, 30 (1977), 94. Such a remark is fruitful in accounting for the particular pluralism within *Hamlet*. Richard Lanham also sees the play as fundamentally divided between the serious and the playful, but he fails to find a connection between them; See *The Motives of Eloquence: Literary Rhetoric in the Renaissance* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1976). The present essay seeks to grasp the connection.

For the same connection as a characteristic accomplishment of the Renaissance, the work of Mikhail Bakhtin is especially valuable. In *Rabelais and His World* (Cambridge, Mass.: M.I.T. Press, 1968), p. 6, he cites a traditional instance of the compatibility or interdependence of satiric and heroic modes in early Roman military triumphs, where victorious generals were simultaneously praised and satirized in the songs of those who followed them in the procession. His “dialogic principle,” moreover, corresponds to what concerns me here—the collision of styles within Hamlet's language and character. See Bakhtin's "Discourse in the Novel," in *The Dialogic Imagination* (Austin and London: Univ. of Texas Press, 1981).

7. For my understanding of their dialectical relationship I am indebted to an extremely important work by Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1982).
8. I blush at the lack of euphony of this chemical term, and am sensitive to the proliferation of technical vocabulary in some current literary theory, including work I respect and to which I am indebted. The term is nevertheless an apt metaphor for the special principle of characterization I describe, since it refers to compounds with identical elements in a mirror shape but with different properties. Like characters, they may look and behave differently from one another, but yet have an affinity in their natures. The term “mirror” is insufficiently precise. My ideas about doubling were undoubtedly nurtured at an early stage by Norman Rabkin's “complementarity”—his analogy, from physics, describing Shakespeare's habit of allowing unresolved contradictions. See Rabkin's *Shakespeare and the Common Understanding* (New York and London: Macmillan, 1967). But my use of “complementary” in this essay is less philosophical; it is not intended to imply competing values. It implies rather that the mixture is not one of just any two character types. The prince and satirist are both conventionally and logically a pair, compatible or interdependent.

Both of the metaphors I use to characterize representational conventions or audience strategies—translucency and enantiomorphism—are intended to be provisional terms until others
arrive. Yet they can be used for now to challenge a prevailing analogy drawn from the field of perception and advocated by Rabkin: the “duck/rabbit” drawing of a double figure whose two shapes cannot be simultaneously identified. That analogy is usually extended to characterization and to entire plays, as in Rabkin's “Rabbits, Ducks, and Henry V,” *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 28 (Summer 1977), 279-96. But there are different ways that things can happen, and there are other conventions, as I hope to show in the case of translucency, for which simultaneity is not only possible but the entire point.

17. See chap. 11, “The Ultimate Slave,” in Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death*. His historical analysis of the “limiting case” of slavery in which an individual slave can wield extraordinary political power in a state reads like a gloss on this anecdote and on the political significance of Diogenes.
21. Donald K. Hedrick, “The Masquing Principle in Marston's *The Malcontent,*” *English Literary Renaissance*, 8 (Winter 1978), 24-42. Repeating some of the present argument, the essay offers additional analysis of masque aesthetic. Malevole, like Hamlet a figure of satiric-heroic duality, is called a “repressed satirist,” a phrase extended to Hamlet in an early version of the present essay, delivered at the Shakespeare Association of America meeting in Toronto in 1978. This idea has been addressed independently by Gerald L. Bruns, who also finds in Hamlet a “repressed satirist whose deepest wish erupts into a true purgation” in the killings of Polonius and Claudius. See Bruns's essay, “Allegory and Satire: A Rhetorical Meditation,” *New Literary History*, 11 (Autumn 1979), 129.
31. See Warren V. Shepherd, “Hoisting the Enginer with his Own Petar,” *SQ [Shakespeare Quarterly]*, 7 (Spring 1956), 281-85.
32. It would seem that further support for a double Hamlet is offered by George T. Wright's recent examination of Shakespeare's frequent use of *hendiadys in the play*: “Hendiadys and *Hamlet*,” *PMLA*, 96 (March 1981), 168-93. This trope substituting two nouns for a noun and its adjective he takes to be “a stylistic emblem of the major meanings of *Hamlet*” (p. 181)—that is, signifying the false unions and duplicities that taint its world. But I do not believe that Wright's essay, despite its illuminating sensitivity to language and its instructive correction of *OED* error, lends support to my argument. First, thematizing rhetorical features is a game at which one cannot lose: any figure involving parallelism, balance, or antithesis could be associated with “duplicity” in the play. If hendiadys is an example of some inappropriate doubling, it is not necessarily an expression of inappropriate doubling. And, second, it is probably not even an example of inappropriate doubling, nor would it need to be experienced that way, its infrequency notwithstanding. Puttenham, for instance, includes it among other figures recommended for sound and some sense. See George Puttenham, *The Arte of English Poesie* (London, 1589), Book III, chap. 16.
33. “Within the arena of almost every utterance an intense interaction and struggle between one's own and another's word is being waged, a process in which they oppose or dialogically interanimate each other. The utterance so conceived is a considerably more complex and dynamic organization than it appears when construed simply as a thing that articulates the intention of the person uttering it, which is to see the utterance as a direct, single-voiced vehicle for expression.” Bakhtin, “Discourse in the Novel,” p. 354.
35. Although my interpretation of the way that Hamlet's character relies on a “paradigm” is like Northrop Frye's interpretation of the way any literary character relies on some “stock type” as the skeleton for other features, I wish to invert his assumptions about *consistency*. Frye claims that “all lifelike characters, whether in drama or fiction, owe their consistency to the appropriateness of the stock type which belongs to their dramatic function.” See *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton, 1957; rpt., New York: Atheneum, 1968), p. 172. I would revise this in order to claim that all lifelike characters, whether in drama or in fiction or in life, owe their inconsistency to the inappropriateness of a stock type which belongs to their dramatic function.
36. For the initiation of this historiographic project, see Stephen Greenblatt, “Introduction,” *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1980), p. 5. This and Greenblatt's subsequent work are demonstrations of the political force of cultural image-making. That a major Polish production of *Hamlet* was planned by activists just prior to the government's imposition of martial law testifies to the play's perennial intervention into real questions of statecraft, of legitimation crises, and of the power that images of madness and marginality can appropriate.
against tyranny.

That a heroic Alexander requires a satiric Diogenes is a translation of the central thesis of the historical, cross-cultural study by Patterson, who maintains that the concept of freedom requires and is derived from the practice of slavery. In his analysis of social parasitism and powerlessness Patterson is perplexed by “the problem of freedom,” and concludes:

Beyond the socio-historical findings is the unsettling discovery that an ideal cherished in the West beyond all others emerged as a necessary consequence of the degradation of slavery and the effort to negate it. The first men and women to struggle for freedom, the first to think of themselves as free in the only meaningful sense of the term, were freedmen. And without slavery there would have been no freedmen.

(\textit{Slavery and Social Death}, pp. 341-42)

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\textbf{Criticism: Themes: Larry S. Champion (essay date summer/winter 1993)}


[\textit{In the following essay, Champion remarks on the numerous proverbs that appear in Hamlet, suggesting that they are not used only to delineate the characters, but also to highlight the political tensions surrounding the aging Elizabeth I and the lack of an heir to her throne.}]

Proverbs so fascinated sixteenth-century England that they accomplished the unlikely journey from the edge of folklore to the core of academic learning. Those who collected them or who acclimatized foreign proverbs to English soil were “hailed as benefactors who enriched the ‘copy’ of their native tongue” (Wilson, “Shakespeare” 186). 1 In the first two forms of the grammar school the proverb came to be regarded as an invaluable aid in the teaching of translation, the purpose being both to “help the child to his Latins by known precepts culled from the spoken idiom” and to “inculcate in the stripling a suitable moral sentiment” (Orkin 79). 2 Such materials readily available to the Elizabethan pupil included John Withal's \textit{A Dictionary in English and Latin Deuised for the capacitye of Children and young beginners}, Richard Tavener's \textit{Proverbs or Adagies gathered out of the Chiliades of Erasmus}, Nicholas Udall's \textit{Flours of Terence}, and Thomas Wilson's \textit{The Arte of Rhetorique}, which ran through six editions between 1553 and 1598. While not prescribed in the grammar schools, John Heywood's \textit{A Dialogue of Proverbs} also was printed six times between 1546 and 1598.

Elizabethans, in other words, became “not merely proverb-loving but proverb-conscious” (Heseltine xiii), and these folk sayings abound in a variety of works ranging from “simple manuals for the young to some of the chief expressions of literary art” (Habenicht 17). Not surprisingly, they are ubiquitous in the drama of the period, their familiarity and simplistic nature often a source of comedy. Just as euphuism can easily become a parody of itself, the difference between persuasion and banal sententiousness is measured in relatively small degrees. And the playwright is quick to capitalize on rhetorical pretension and abuse. Captain Bobadil in Ben Jonson's \textit{Every Man In His Humor}, for example, scorns Squire Downright as an insufferable boor: “He ha's not so much as a good phrase in his belly, but all old iron, and rustie proverbs! a good commoditie for some smith, to make hob-nailes of” (1.5.95-98). Perhaps the most notorious example is Nicholas, a servant in Henry Porter's \textit{The Two Angry Women of Abingdon} who is mockingly called Proverbs because of his overfondness...
for “old said sooth.” (1.2.228) Typical of his speech is his comment that he will not stir a foot to participate in an impending fight:

No, indeed; even as they brew so let them bake. I will not thrust my hand into the flame, an I need not; ’tis not good to have an oar in another man's boat; little said is soon amended, and in little meddling cometh great rest; ’tis good sleeping in a whole skin; so a man might come home by Weeping-Cross; no, by lady, a friend is not so soon gotten as lost; blessed are the peace-makers; they that strike with the sword, shall be bitten with the scabbard.

(3.2.430-38)

In a later passage (4.3.122 ff.), he strings together fifty proverbs in fifty-three lines. His companions brand him a “whoreson proverb-book bound up in folio” (2.1.438-39): “speak men when they can to him, he'll answer with some rhyme-rotten sentence or old saying” (395-96).

Shakespeare also uses proverbs for comic purposes throughout his plays. In Henry V, for example, in response to the Dauphin's proverb-mongering about his great bravery and his anticipation of victory over the English at Agincourt, the Constable cautions that the French should use no “proverb so little kin to the purpose (3.7.68); and later he and Orleans privately mock the arrogant prince with a shower of proverbs such as “Give the devil his due,” “A pox of the devil” and “A fool's bolt is soon shot” (116-17, 119-20, 122). Launce in The Two Gentlemen of Verona employs proverbs like “Blessing of your heart, you brew good ale” (3.1.304-05) to catalogue the virtues of the milkmaid who has stolen his heart, and his counterpart Launcelot Gobbo in The Merchant of Venice spouts proverbs in defense of his decision to leave Shylock's service.

Comedy, however, reflects only one aspect of the significance of proverbs in dramatic literature of the period. Obviously, expressions that carry the weight of traditional wisdom and sound authoritative can, if cleverly utilized, be an effective strategy for dealing with surrounding figures, what Hardin Craig has described as a “disarming rhetorical aid to the individual who seeks to influence his auditors for good or evil” (249). Because of their "interactional and semiotic features" (Norrick 5), proverbs are sufficiently ambiguous to take root in a given social situation (Whiting 298). In drama, more specifically, proverbs can enhance the credibility of a character by lending him an air of experience while at the same time drawing the spectator closer to him by creating a sense of shared intimacy, affability, and openness, breaking down psychological defense mechanisms that serve as barriers to trust in personal communication. In Othello, for instance, Shakespeare uses proverbs to enhance a bonding, if uncomfortable, familiarity between the spectator and Iago, who delivers 66 of the 152 proverbs found in the play, 27 of 39 in the four opening scenes in which he is laying out his scheme against Othello and 16 of 25 in the critical scene (3.3) in which he lures the Moor into his trap. And Shakespeare uses such a verbal pattern as part of the strategy for prompting a strong, vicarious relationship between viewer and protagonist in Hamlet, a play in which seventeen characters speak a total of 212 proverbs\(^5\) with Hamlet himself delivering more than half (107).

Shakespeare's use of the proverb in Hamlet, more precisely, forms the focus of this paper. The aim is not to identify heretofore unnoticed maxims in the play but to examine certain dramaturgical functions concerning those that have already been catalogued by Dent, Tilley, F. P. Wilson, and others\(^6\)—specifically, how the
proverb serves as a conscious rhetorical strategy both to develop and enhance characterization and also to lend emotional and intellectual credibility to an ideological leitmotif that foregrounds political issues of concern to the Elizabethan spectator. Obviously proverbs cannot in themselves carry a theme or plot line, but they can be used to reinforce and energize an issue by rendering the audience more responsive to the character and his/her ideas.

Most noticeably, Shakespeare employs proverbs as a method of establishing character individuation. Polonius, for instance, who delivers twenty-two proverbs in two of the eight scenes in which he appears, is much like Nicholas Proverb in Porter's play. In context, the proverbs he spouts have a cumulatively comic effect; trite and cliché-ridden, they accentuate an approaching senility in the sometimes doddering old man. His moral precepts spoken to Laertes, more specifically, are not in themselves humorous; but audiences—and, as often played, Laertes and Ophelia themselves—rarely fail to be amused as saw piles upon saw to create a virtual parody of sound moral advice: “Give thy thoughts no tongue” (59) (A wise man hath his mouth in his heart while a fool has his heart in his mouth—T219); “Be thou familiar but by no means vulgar” (61) (Familiarity breeds contempt—F741). Test the “adoption” of “those friends thou hast” (62) (Try before you trust—T595); “Grapple [your true friends] unto thy soul with hoops of steel” (62-63) (Keep well thy friends when thou hast gotten them—F752); “Do not dull thy palm with entertainment” (64) (Give not your right hand to every man—H68); “Give every man thy ear but few thy voice” (68) (Hear much but speak little—M1277); “Take each man's censure, but reserve thy judgment” (69) (A man should hear all parts ere he judge any—M299); “Costly thy habit [but] not gaudy” (70-71) (Apparel oft proclaims the man—A283, or Clothes make the man—C541); “Loan oft loses both itself and friend” (76) (Who loans to a friend loses double—F725). In similar terms, Polonius warns Ophelia that Hamlet's amorous advances are merely ploys to capture her virginity, “springes to catch woodcocks” (115; S788). He admonishes her not to take Hamlet's pledge of love seriously: “These blazes … you must not take for fire” (117, 120) (The bavin burns bright, but it is just a blaze—B107).

Such a use of proverbs also taints the rest of Polonius' immediate family with a degree of vacuousness. As Doris Falk has observed, Laertes and Ophelia “share a destiny compounded of truism and truth, of absurdity and justice” (36). Laertes, for example, sounds much like his father in warning his sister that Hamlet, in taking a wife, cannot “carve for himself” (1.3.20; C110). It, he adds, “fits [her] wisdom so far to believe it [and to] give his saying deed” (25, 27) (Saying and doing are two different things—S119). She must keep herself “out of the shot and danger of desire” (35) (Out of gunshot—G482) since “Virtue itself scapes not calumnious strokes” (38) (Envy shoots at the fairest mark—E175) and the canker too often “galls the infants of the spring” (39) (The canker soonest eats the fairest rose—C56). In stark contrast to Hamlet's markedly intellectual reaction to the death of his father, Laertes' immediate and unmeditated response to Polonius' death is “let come what comes” (4.5.136; C529). A proverb leaps to his lips again when he mourns for Ophelia, that “rose of May” (158) (As fresh as May flowers—F389). At one moment he excuses his tears for his dead sister as the custom of nature (4.7.187) (Custom makes sin no sin—C934); at another he proclaims that his grief is strong enough to “o'ertop old Pelion, or the skyish head / of blue Olympus” (5.1.253-54) (To heap Ossa upon Pelion—081). Even at the moment of his fatal wounding with the rapier he himself has tipped with poison, he echoes a variation of the proverb his father used earlier in observing that death is “a woodcock to mine own springe” (5.2.306) (The fowler is caught in his own net—F626, S788).

Ophelia, likewise, is never lost for a proverb. Her father's admonitions about Hamlet are “in [her] memory lock'd” (1.3.85) (To keep the key—K24.1); and she cautions Laertes, concerning his own advice, to “Do not, as some ungracious pastors do, / Show me ... heaven [while yourself treading] the primrose path of dalliance” (47-49) (Practice what you preach—P537a). When Hamlet appears in her closet, he is as “pale as his shirt” (2.1.78) (As pale as a clout—C446). In his distraction he, “like sweet bells jangled out of tune” (3.1.158; T598.1), is no longer the “glass of fashion, and the mould of form” (153) (Like king like people—K470). Later in her madness she implies that she is a “baker's daughter [strumpet]” (4.5.43; B54.1); and, calling both Polonius' shroud and his hair as white “as the mountain snow” (36, cf. 195; S591), she trusts that he “made a
good end” (186; E133.1).

The pattern is similar, then, for each member of Polonius’ family. Whether it be in their overly pious and moralistic tone, the simplistic manner in which they are frequently spoken on stage, or the fact that on numerous occasions they tend to transform a highly dramatic situation into near-ludicrous melodrama by reducing a complex personal moment into generic formula, proverbs in the mouths of Polonius, Laertes, and Ophelia reflect an intellectual shallowness that both serves as a foil to Hamlet’s mental agility and ultimately contributes to their destruction in the intrigue ridden Danish court.

Claudius’ proverbs in his first scene on stage, in which surrounded by courtiers and councilors, he attempts to justify his marriage to the Queen within weeks of the elder Hamlet’s death, also help to establish his character for the spectators. The oxymoronic iteration and the overly unctuous and justificatory tone, coupled with a virtual preemption of dialogue with surrounding figures, suggest something sinister and Machiavellian about this newly self-proclaimed king and what Madeleine Doran has branded his “politician’s speech” (265). The publicly acknowledged grief is carefully controlled by use of the royal “we” and by the immediate suggestion that self-interest mandates it be brief: “We with wisest sorrow think on him” (1.2.6) (He is not wise that is not wise for himself—W532) since “with remembrance of ourselves” (7) (We should remember ourselves—R72.1) and “with an auspicious, and a dropping eye” (11) (To cry with one eye and laugh with the other—E248) we must “Throw to the earth / This unprevailing woe” (106-07) (Past cure, past care—C921).

In regard to characterization proverbs function most significantly in the delineation of Hamlet himself; whereas those spoken by other figures point to particular dominant traits and tend to establish a consistent personality, Hamlet’s reveal something of the complexity of the man, like his soliloquies reflecting diverse, even polarized, aspects of his total characterization. They function, in effect, as a device for complication rather than for clarity, since with Hamlet the decision or the mind-set of one moment is forgotten or ignored in the next. One minute, for instance, he is witty and sarcastically enigmatic, muttering to Claudius that he is “A little more than kin, and less than kind” (1.2.65) (The nearer in kin the less in kindness—K38) and, in response to the King’s request that he not return to Wittenberg, pointedly quipping, “I shall in all my best obey you, madam” (120) (Yours to command in the way of honesty—W155). Later, observing the bones tossed up by the gravedigger, he observes that those now dead were “sheeps and calves [to] seek assurance in” legal documents (5.1.116-17) (As simple as a sheep—S295.1; As wise as a calf—C16.1), and he speaks of being undone unless he can converse with the gravedigger “by the card” (138; C75.1). He is cruelly sarcastic in telling Polonius that, were he honest, he would, “as this world goes” (2.2.178) (Thus goes the world—W884.1), “be one man pick’d out of ten thousand” (179) (A man among a thousand—M271). He calls Polonius a fishmonger “not out of his swaddling-clouts” (383; S1021.1) who should “play the fool nowhere but in’s own house” (3.1.132; A67). He carps to Ophelia that “wise men know well enough what monsters you make of them” (138) (A cuckold is a beast—C876.2), that it would “cost [her] a groaning to take off [his] edge” (3.2.250-51; E57.1), and that she “mistake [s her] husbands” (252) (A man must take a wife for better or for worse—M65). The death he administers to Polonius is, for fat king or lean beggar, “variable service, two dishes, but to one table” (4.3.23-24) (Death is the great leveler—D143); and of Osric’s “duty” he quips that “A does well to commend it himself, there are no tongues else for's turn” (5.2.183-84) (He must praise himself since no man else will—P545.1).

Wit, however, is but one aspect of Hamlet; elsewhere proverbs reflect his impetuosity and vengefulness. He proclaims that he will move against Claudius “with wings as swift / As meditation” (1.5.29-30) (As swift as thought—T240). Furious that his uncle murdered his father without benefit of confession, with “crimes … as flush as May” (3.3.81) (As fresh as May—M763, F389), he desires to “trip [Claudius], that his heels may kick at heaven” (93) (To kick up one’s heels—H392) so that his soul “may be damn’d and black / As hell” (94-95; H397). In his mother’s bedchamber he hears a “rat” behind the arras (3.4.24) (The rat destroyed itself with its own noise—R31, R30.1), and he observes concerning the dead Polonius that “to be too busy is some danger” (33; B759.1).
At other times Hamlet's proverbs reflect a moralist with a quick conscience. He would gladly, for instance, make his own "quietus" (3.1.74; Q16), but the "rub" (64; R196) is that one would rather "bear those ills [he has], / Than fly to others that he knows not of" (80-81) (Better the harm I know than that I know not—H166). He will "speak daggers" (3.2.396; D8.1) to his mother in her bedchamber and wring her heart "if custom has not brass'd it" (3.4.37) (As hard as brass—B605.1), since "monster custom" (161) (Custom makes sin no sin—C934) "can almost change the stamp of nature" (168) (Custom is a tyrant—C932). Unless she repents, virtue will "melt in her own fire" (85) (Fry in her own grease—G433), and "This bad [beginning will have] worse remain [ing] behind" (179) (An ill beginning has as ill ending—B261, W918).

At other moments he is deeply suspicious or charged with grief and despair. His "I doubt some foul play" (1.2.155), "Murder, though it have no tongue, will speak" (2.2.593) (Murder will out—M1315), and "O my prophetic soul!" (1.5.40; S665.2) harden into "break my heart for I must hold my tongue" (1.2.159) (Grief pent up will break the heart—G449), "I do not set my life at a pin's fee" (1.4.65) (My life is not worth a pin—P334), and his lament that the "time is out of joint" (1.5.188; J74) and that he has been "born to set it right" (189) (Alas that ever I was born—B140.1). This tone echoes again in later acts in his relativistic pronouncement that "There is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so" (2.2.249-50) (A man is weal or woe as he thinks himself so—M254), in "my thanks are too dear a halfpenny" (273-74) (Not worth a halfpenny—H50.1), in his "tak[ing] arms against a sea of troubles" (3.1.58; S177.1), and in his branding himself as one who is "pigeon-liver'd, and lack[ing in] gall" (2.2.577) (Doves have no gall—D574).

In a word, Hamlet is a man of varied, even contradictory emotions who but slenderly knows himself. In moving from proverb to proverb his convictions and dispositions appear to change drastically, as if they were a kaleidoscope of diverse faces rather than projections of the same fundamental personality. So, too, proverbial comments about Hamlet from surrounding figures compound this complexity. Polonius, for instance, is convinced the prince's "still harping on my daughter" (2.2.187-88) (To harp on one string—S396) is evidence of a problem of unrequited love "whose violent property foredoes itself" (2.1.100; N321). Gertrude's "O Hamlet, speak no more! / Thou turnest my eyes into my very soul" (3.4.88-89; B546.1) in the closet scene suggests a moral absolutist. At other points her proverbs question his basic sanity; if her comment that her son is "Mad as the sea and wind when both contend / which is the mightier" (4.1.7-8; S170) is conceivably a ploy to protect him, there is no such explanation for her remark during his altercation with Laertes at Ophelia's grave: "This is mere madness, / And thus a while the fit will work on him; / Anon, as patient as the female dove" (5.1.284-86; D573). Ophelia's earlier remarks that Hamlet appeared to her "Pale as a shirt, his knees knocking at each other" (2.1.78; C446) and that his words were "Like sweet bells jangled out of tune, and harsh" (3.1.158; T598.1) have a similar unsettling effect upon the spectator, despite Hamlet's claim that he is "but mad north-northwest" and that he "know[s] a hawk from a handsaw" (2.2.378-79; H226). Claudius' comment "these words are not mine" (3.2.97) (While the word is in your mouth it is your own; when it is spoken it is another's—W776), when he is unable to understand Hamlet's remarks just prior to the play-within-the-play, further suggests the possibility of genuine rather than "antic" madness.

There is obviously no single face for the protagonist that the pieces of the first four acts can be made to fit without distortion and oversimplification. Indeed, much of the power of the tragedy lies in the ambiguous "biases and indirection of thought" (Donawerth 33) created in part through the use of proverbs that, in a "variety of idioms" (Ewbank 90), provide flickering insights into a complex and profoundly human personality. Moreover, while proverbs reflect his continuing mystery prior to his sea change, they also signal a kind of insight following his return to the Danish court, a sense of consistency and conviction even during his participation in actions that will leave a trail of human carnage from Gertrude's bedchamber to the great hall of the castle. Hamlet's conviction that "There's a divinity that shapes our ends" (5.2.10) (Man proposes, God disposes—M298), that "a man's life's no more than to say 'one'" (74; 050.1), that "to know a man well were to know himself" (139) (know thyself—K175), and that all is subject to "this fell sergeant, Death" (336) (Death is the great leveler—D142.2) points (whatever the spectator may think of it) to a protagonist who has arrived at a kind of faith, whether through Christian conviction, the assumption that "there are no invariable
criteria to appeal to outside of a given political context” (Asher 141), or the realization that he can confirm no “final and coherent constructions of reality” (Warner 274).

While Shakespeare uses proverbs as a method of enriching the characterization in the play, he also employs them to emotionalize a plot line that interrogates traditional political assumptions in his society. For one thing, he sprinkles the dialogue of the first gravedigger with proverbs to add a folksy and humorous quality to (and thus to deflect) a passage of pointed social criticism. As Michael Cohen has recently observed, “The clowns see the suborned coroner and priest as agents of an upper-class conspiracy to make sure the rich and privileged are treated with class distinctions even after death.” (80) Complaining that Ophelia is allowed a Christian burial only because she is a gentlewoman and that it is “the more pity” that “great folk” are so privileged, the gravedigger mitigates the effect upon aristocratic ears of his assertion that a commoner (gravedigger) is worth more (builds stronger) by surrounding it with proverbs: “Confess thyself” (5.1.39) (Confess and be hanged—C587) and “Your dull ass will not mend his pace with beating” (57) (A dull ass must have a sharp spur—A348.1).

More importantly, Shakespeare through a series of proverbs forces the spectators’ attention to political issues that underlie the major action. Obviously, the surface issues of the tragedy deal with the moral dimensions of murder. Hamlet grapples with philosophic questions concerning the nature of man and the universe in which he lives, questions of right and wrong, of justice and law, of the meaning of death, of maternal love perverted by sin and corruption, of the nature of vengeance and an individual’s right to pursue it. At the same time, however, the murder victim in the narrative was a king, the assassin has become a king, the revenger apparently anticipated election to the throne at his father’s death, and the closure results in a power vacuum at the very heart of monarchic government. Moreover, there are at least four specific references to Hamlet’s political ambitions spaced throughout the play—Claudius’ comment that he is “the most immediate to our throne” (1.2.109); Rosencrantz’s probing observation that, if Denmark is like a prison, “Why then your ambition makes it one” (2.2.251); Rosencrantz’s assurance that he has “the voice of the king himself for [his] succession in Denmark” (3.2.241-42); and Hamlet’s concern in act 5 that Claudius has “Popp’d in between th’ election and [his] hopes” (5.2.65). Issues of tyranny, usurpation, legitimacy, succession, and court sycophancy could never be far from the thoughts of Englishmen at the turn of the seventeenth century, with Elizabeth old, an heir unnamed, legitimacy a question to which Elizabeth a few years earlier had given a political response through the execution of Mary Queen of Scots, Essex’s rebellion and attempted usurpation literally occurring in the probable year of the play’s composition, inflation increasing at an alarming rate, and charges of favoritism at court almost routine.

To tap that interest Shakespeare develops a pattern of proverbs that foreground and emotionally reinforce political concerns marginalized by the narrative. Rosencrantz, for example, acting as Claudius’ agent, attempts to pry information out of Hamlet with the maxim “You do surely bar the door upon your own liberty if you deny your griefs to a friend” (3.2.338-39) (Grief is lessened when imparted to others—G447). And Polonius’ proverbs reveal this high courtier to be fundamentally devious and sycophantic. In sending Reynaldo to spy on his own son, for instance, he explains that “Your bait of falsehood takes this carp of truth” (2.1.60) and that he “By indirections [will] find directions out” (63) both variations on To tell a lie and find the truth—L237. The moment he discovers what he believes to be the cause of Hamlet’s distraction, his only thought is to seek out the king to explain this “ecstasy of love / Whose violent property foredoes itself” (99-100) (Nothing violent can be permanent—N321) and thus ingratiates himself further with the ruler. His obsequious deference is reflected in his promise to be brief since “Brevity is the soul of wit” (2.2.90) (Greatest wit consists in fewest words—B652), his offhanded comment during his report “But let that go” (95) (Truth hath no need of rhetoric—T575), and in his assurance to Claudius that Ophelia realizes she is not of royal stock and thus has no designs upon the prince: “Lord Hamlet is a prince out of [her] star; / This must not be” (141-42) (To be out of one’s element—E107).
It is through Hamlet's proverbs that the spectators are most consistently and forcefully reminded of the power struggle underlying the narrative. For one thing, his own political ambitions are implied throughout the play, whether through his aphorism about being “a little more than kin” (1.2.65; K38); or about living in the secret parts of strumpet fortune (Fortune is a strumpet—F603.1); or about his fortune's having “turn[ed] Turk” (3.2.276) (To go bad—T609); or about eating “promise-crammed” air (possibly a homonymic pun on “heir”) (3.2.93; M226); or his pointedly unfinished remark to Rosencrantz, “While the grass grows” (343) (While the grass grows, the seed starves—G423); or his comment to Horatio, “The cat will mew, and dog will have his day” (5.1.292) (Every dog has his day—D464). His disguise of innocence is almost shorn away during the play-within-the-play with his observation that “the croaking raven doth bellow for revenge” (254) (The croaking raven bodes misfortune—R33). He later informs his mother that he will take delight in trapping the king's agents Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in their own net, like the “engineer / Hoist on his own petar” (3.4.206-07) (The fowler is caught in his own net—F626, To beat one at his own weapon—W204, P243.1).

It is on the question of legitimacy that Hamlet's proverbs essentially focus. Claudius' integrity is directly impugned in the comment that “one may smile, and smile, and be a villain” (1.5.108; F16). And his corruptions are manifest. He fails to bridle himself as a sound ruler must; his propensity for alcohol leads him, in having canon's announce his every drink, to a “custom more honor'd in the breach than the observance” (1.4.15-16) (A bad custom is like a good cake, A bad custom is better broken than kept—C931) and has contributed to a disastrous national reputation since other nations “clip us drunkards, and with swinish phrase / Soil our addition” (19-20) (As drunk as a swine—S1042). He manipulates others to his own purposes; Rosencrantz, for instance, is merely a sponge to be tolerated so long as he is useful, “first mouth'd, to be last swallow'd” (4.2.18-19; N363). He surrounds himself with corrupt officials; the Danish court is an “unweeded garden / That grows to seed [and is filled with] things rank and gross in nature” (1.2.135-36) (Weeds come forth on the fattest field if it is untilled—W241). Indeed, the kingdom itself is corrupted by the figure at the center: “The dram of ev'1 / Doth all the noble substance of a doubt / To his own scandal” (1.4.36-38) (One ill condition mars all the good—C585).

Hamlet is convinced, however, that the tyrant cannot maintain his composure. With the play at court he will “tent him to the quick” (2.2.597; Q13). Prior to the performance he ironically assures Claudius that those with clear consciences need fear nothing: “Let the gall'd jade wince” (3.2.243-44) (Touch a galled horse on his back, and he will wince—H700). When the king rises to leave, mid-performance, Hamlet quips, “What, frightened with false fire?” (266; F40.1), and he observes, concerning the hasty departure, “let the strooken deer go weep” (271) (As the stricken deer withdraws himself to die—D189) and “some must watch while some must sleep” (273) (Thus goes the world—W884.1).

At one point Hamlet's comments seem pointedly to justify political action. He notes that the Poles and the Norwegians “Will not debate the question of this straw” (4.4.26) (Not worth a straw—S198) but will fight to the death “Even for an egg-shell” (53) (Not worth an eggshell—E95). And he proclaims that it is right for them (and by analogy him and others) to kill, to “Go to their graves like beds” (62) (To accept danger without question—B192.1) “when honor's at the stake” (55) (To have one's honor [reputation] at the stake [on the line]—S813.2).

Shakespeare, in a word, uses proverbs not only as a verbal device for character individuation and development but also to lend emotional coloration to the political dimensions of a narrative that, while centered on personal revenge, he created “in the aftermath of a failed rebellion (for whose leader he had once thought to intercede), on the threshold of a new regime (whose character was not yet imaginable), for a theater perceived at the time as powerful social practice” (Patterson 101). In such a manner he is able to generate a high degree of interest in oppositional politics by depicting diverse ideologies that compete both on stage in recreated Denmark and in the minds of the English spectators. It would be dangerously presumptuous—and irrelevant—to infer anything about Shakespeare's politics from this dramatic strategy. And it would be equally dangerous—and inaccurate—to infer any kind of unanimity in the spectators' responses. The Elizabethan audience was
composed of heterogeneous classes and of individuals with strikingly different political agendas. The theater was the “site of a clash of discourses determined by class affiliation” (Weimann 36); and, once a play made its way past the barriers of censorship, it had to hold the attention of a broad public drawn both from the aristocratic and the artisan and working class. While the playwright was not free to create on stage an arrant subversion of authority (and in many instances probably had no desire to do so), what he could do was to develop strategies to explore critically the sources of authority (Dollimore 4).

Proverbs form an important part of such a rhetorical strategy through which Shakespeare creates a political internal dialectic. If he employs them in a context that consistently strengthens the appeal of those who oppose autocratic power, he does so in all likelihood for the sake of effective dramaturgy in the face of a socially and politically mixed audience, to equalize interest in the familiar and dominant monarchic absolutism and the politically marginal concept of decentralized government. The effectiveness of this balance is less readily apparent today not only because of the erosion of the rhetorical power of proverbs but also because of fundamental differences in political perspective.

Notes

1. Henry Peacham in 1593 described the proverb as a locution “grounded upon the strong foundation of experiences confirmed by all times, allowed in all places, and subscribed to by all men” (86-87); three centuries later Disraeli characterized them as containing a “parsimony of words prodigal of sense” (1: 425). More recently, they have been called “situational formulas” (Zimmer 38) bringing us “close to man and often near to wisdom” (Whiting et al. 83).

2. Proverbs were considered “the properties, the proofs, the purities, the elegances” (Florio 49), “caueats … both profitable and delightful” (Camden 271), the means by which one knows those things “nedefull or expediente to bee dooen” (Erasmus 4), a method of displaying “the contraries of things, perferring always the best: declaring thereby both the profits of vertue, and the inconveniences of vices, that we, considering both, may embrace the good and eschew the evil” (Baldwin 21). As Thomas Wilson observed, “In praising or dispraising, we must be well stored ever with such good sentences, as are often used in this our life, the which through art being increased, help much to persuasion” (116).

3. Tilley argues that many of the unexplained jests in the dialogue result from proverbs whose contexts are obscure (“Pun and Proverb” 495). As Hilda M. Hulme observes, the challenge in understanding proverbs is “to find a way of entering into the particular kind of proverb games which characterized the speech community in which Shakespeare lived” (40).

4. The power of the proverb is readily demonstrated. It, for example, is the “most popular folklore item used by Madison Avenue, … awakening positive traditional feelings in the consumer” (Mieder and Mieder 309). On the use of proverbial language to emotionalize contemporary speeches and addresses, see Mieder 14-22 and Miller and Villarreal 151-55.

5. This number is surpassed only in two of Shakespeare's most highly rhetorical works—Romeo and Juliet with 248 and Love’s Labor’s Lost with 223.

6. The basis for my discussion is Dent, who—by building upon Tilley (Dictionary), Whiting and Whiting, and F. P. Wilson (Oxford)—has identified 4,451 proverbs in Shakespeare: 1609 in the comedies (an average of 123 per play), 1280 in the tragedies (128), 1183 in the histories (118), and 379 in the romances (75). Each of the proverbs cited in Hamlet is coded to Appendix A in Dent; in second citations and in those instances in which Shakespeare's wording is sufficiently similar for the meaning to be clear, only code references are indicated in the text.

7. Polonius is a “foolish prattling knave” (Bennett 3) whose use of “quibbling and plurisignation” (Clayton 60) signals a “love of sleuthing on a trail of policy” (Mahood 119).

8. This proverb appears to operate at the level of a triple pun, the comparison of two workmen's tools (Anderson 200), of two birds (handsaw as a variant of heronshaw—Drew 495), or of two utterly incongruous objects.
9. Critics have suggested various sources for Shakespeare's use of this proverb—Sylvester's *Du Bartas* (Leishman 196-97), the pictorial and literary tradition of the Dance of Death (Pecheux 75), the tradition in the morality plays of depicting Death as a "sergeant-at-arms with his mace" (Viswanathan 85), a general currency reflected in earlier manuscripts (Pitts 488).
10. Warren V. Shepherd notes that this is a recurring motif in the play, with Hamlet constantly hoisting others with their own petards such as words, players, sailing craft, legal documents, fencing foils and poison (282).
11. Hamlet, who—according to John Hunt—is in such anatomical references “methodically deconstructing the body” (30), must ultimately come to terms with his contempt for the physical.
12. Taylor may well be correct that an individual proverb by nature adheres to the “middle way,” that it “will not champion martyrdom or villainy” (141). Demonstrably, however, Shakespeare's cumulative use of proverbs provides rhetorical support for those who oppose an absolutist government. The political balance was readjusted by the social realities of monarchical government for those who viewed the initial performances.

*Works Cited*


Pecheux, Mother M. Christopher. “Another Note on ‘This Fell Sergeant, Death.’” *Shakespeare Quarterly* 26 (1975): 74-75.


In the following essay, Doubt examines three types of friendship in Hamlet: the loyal friendship that Horatio sustains with the Prince; the ultimately self-serving friendship extended by Rosencrantz and Guildenstern; and the friendship that the dying Laertes offers. In Doubt's view, Laertes's friendship is the most meaningful because it is the most charitable.

“At this a back cloud of grief enveloped Laertes / And taking a dark double-handful of dust he poured it / Upon his grey head, while one groan followed another. As he watched his dear father, the heart of Odysseus was moved / And at once his nostrils tingled with keen compassion. / Quickly he went and took the old king in his arms / And kissed him.”
There are two examples of friendship in *Hamlet*: one, very positive, the other, very negative. Hamlet's friend Horatio, on the one hand, is about as perfect a friend as anyone could ask for. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, on the other hand, are exceedingly imperfect in their friendship with Hamlet.

In Book VIII of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle says that there are three kinds of friendship, each corresponding to a particular human affection. Some friendships are based on their reciprocal usefulness, some on their reciprocal pleasure, and some on their reciprocal commitment to justice. Friendships like the third, which are based on a mutual affection for virtue are the best, Aristotle says.¹

After seeing King Hamlet's ghost, Horatio says, “Let us impart what we have seen tonight unto young Hamlet … as needful in our loves, fitting our duty” (1.1).² Horatio's good will and loyalty toward Hamlet, his wishing for the advantage of Hamlet, is no doubt useful to Hamlet. But Horatio's friendship also gives pleasure to Hamlet. Horatio's empathy for Hamlet's bitter feelings over his mother's hasty marriage comforts Hamlet, “Indeed, my lord, it followed hard upon” (1.2). More importantly, however, with respect to friendship, Hamlet admires Horatio as a paradigm of virtue. “Thou art e'en as just a man / As e'er my conversation coped withal” (3.2.53-54) and, later, “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” (3.2.72-75).

There is a second friendship in the play and that is Hamlet's relation to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. While the failure of this relation is powerfully dramatized, it is important not to forget that at the start Rosencrantz and Guildenstern embody one kind of friendship with Hamlet. Together the three share an affection for what is pleasurable as can be witnessed in their lively exchange of sexual puns. Hamlet is being neither ironic nor superficial when he greets Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, “My excellent good friends! … Good lads, how to ye both?” (2.2.241-243). The point can be supported from Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's side as well. After listening to Hamlet's derision later in the play, Rosencrantz remembers, “My lord, you once did love me” (3.2.342).

Having said this, we need to consider the clear-cut failure of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's friendship with Hamlet. Unlike Horatio, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are not good in themselves; they are hollow men. They are not committed to disclosing to Hamlet what, as a friend, Hamlet asks them to disclose. They confess to Hamlet that they were sent for by the king and queen not because it is their will to confess this truth but because of Hamlet's pressing questioning, “My lord, we were sent for” (2.2.308). Their betrayal of friendship is in order to gain the court's favor.

Rosencrantz queries Hamlet, “Take you me for a sponge, my lord?” (4.2.15), and Hamlet answers, “Ay, sir, that soaks up the King's countenance, his rewards, his authorities. … When he needs what you have gleaned, it is but squeezing you and, sponge, you shall be dry again” (4.2.20-21). Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's 'instrumental' relation provokes Hamlet's rage, a rage that we perhaps all have felt but never so well articulated as when Hamlet upbrowsd them for trying to “pluck out the heart of [his] mystery” (3.2.371-79).

This paper discusses these two types of friendship and their effect on Hamlet. I shall argue that the function of each friendship is to mediate Hamlet's troubled relations to his parents. Horatio, for instance, mediates Hamlet's troubled relation to his father. Horatio makes Hamlet aware of the existence of the ghost of his father, which is the first step in healing Hamlet's grief. Concretely, Horatio helps Hamlet see his father's ghost. Metaphysically, Horatio helps Hamlet remember his father's character. “He was a man, take him for all in all. / I shall not look upon his like again” (1.2.197-198). “And fixed his eyes upon you?” (1.2.252), Hamlet asks Horatio. “Most constantly” (1.2.253). “I would I had been there,” replies Hamlet (1.2.254). Hamlet puts himself in the place of Horatio as a way to imagine his father's loving gaze upon himself. The paradox, of course, is that no one can experience a ghost concretely (only speculatively), and no one can see the
metaphysical non-concretely (without sense perception).

Much as the function of Horatio's friendship is to mediate Hamlet's troubled relation to his father, the function of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's friendship is to mediate Hamlet's relation to his mother. The reasons that Gertrude sent for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern were to try to restore her relation to her son, to remind her son of her good will toward him, and to let her son know that she has always wanted only what is good for him. While to see Gertrude through Hamlet's eyes is to see Gertrude in a despicable light, within the play itself Gertrude at no point forsakes her maternal love toward Hamlet.

Why did Gertrude marry Claudius? Was it only because of passionate love? It is doubtful. Gertrude herself suggests a more likely reason when she says, “Good Hamlet, cast thy nighted color off, / and let thine eye look like a friend on Denmark” (1.2.72-73). Gertrude's marriage with her husband's brother was as much an expression of friendship toward Denmark as it was an expression of love toward Claudius. As Claudius declares publicly, she is “The imperial jointress to this warlike state” (1.2.9). At this critical time, Denmark, Gertrude perceives, needs befriending, not criticism, and she encourages young Hamlet to emulate the spirit of her example—not for her sake but for the sake of Hamlet's lost father and for Denmark's welfare. (This reading differs sharply from the well known study Hamlet and Oedipus by Ernest Jones, which formulates Gertrude's marriage as a passionate one which Hamlet, in view of the Oedipal complex, both abhors and envies.)

At the end of the play, Hamlet's personal tragedy is reinforced by Hamlet's political tragedy—after the sudden death of Hamlet, Denmark is suddenly lost to young Fortinbras, Prince of Norway. “I have some rights of memory in this kingdom, / Which now to claim my vantage doth invite me” (5.2.420-421). Young Fortinbras has acquired without a fight from Denmark what King Hamlet so gallantly won from Fortinbras's slain father. One cannot imagine a more bitter scenario from the perspective of old King Hamlet.

In mediating Hamlet's relation to his mother, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, of course, fail in their mission. The reason, however, is not the absence of the Queen's good will toward Hamlet, but the absence of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's good will. There is a difference in the King and Queen's respective use of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern: Claudius uses Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to fathom Hamlet's esoteric thoughts for his own selfish purpose; the Queen to influence Hamlet in a positive way.

It is interesting in this light to consider the advice that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern offer Hamlet, advice for his troubles that could easily have been from the Queen. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern suggest that the problem behind Hamlet's complaints (“Denmark's a prison” 2.2.260) is that he himself is too ambitious, perhaps more desirous of the crown than he cares to admit. With the voice of practical reason, Guildenstern advises Hamlet, “… the very substance of the ambitious is merely the shadow of a dream” (2.2.273-275). Rosencrantz adds, “I hold ambition of so airy and light a quality that it is but a shadow's shadow.” Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's diagnosis is that Hamlet's ambition for the crown keeps him from enjoying life. Hamlet needs merely to lower his political aspirations and, after doing so, he will enjoy life as they do. “As the indifferent children of the earth” (2.2.244), says Rosencrantz; Guildenstern adds, “Happy in that we are not overhappy” (2.2.245).

These two friendships, Horatio's on the one hand, and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's on the other, affect Hamlet's troubled relations to his parents at more than just the conscious level; they affect his relation at an unconscious level as well. For Hamlet, as we have seen, Horatio mediates between him and his father. Horatio's memory of Hamlet's father solidifies the friendship between the two. Horatio, in fact, is perhaps more an image of Hamlet's father than Hamlet himself. Horatio, “more an antique Roman than a Dane” (5.2.363), and considerably older than Hamlet, is less reflective than young Hamlet and neither so passionate nor so grandiose.
Rosencrantz and Guildenstern mediate Hamlet's relation to his mother at an unconscious level as well. In retrieving Hamlet for the Queen, Rosencrantz tells Hamlet, "She desires to speak with you in her closet ere you go to bed" (3.2.339-340); Hamlet satirically replies, "We shall obey, were she ten times our mother." This mediation to some degree is Oedipal, but it is not limited by that notion.

Hamlet's near rejection of his mother is what kills her psychologically in the closet scene (act 3, scene 4). Just as with a sword Hamlet wants to determine the fate of Claudius's soul, with moral judgment Hamlet seeks to destroy the psyche of his mother. "O Hamlet, speak no more! / Thou turn'st mine eyes into my very soul, / And there I see such black and grained spots / As will not leave their tinct" (3.4.99-102). Hamlet over-reaches his responsibility not only in his duty to his father but also in admonishing his mother. The Ghost reappears to Hamlet and says, "Do not forget. This visitation / Is but to whet thy almost blunted purpose" (3.4.125-126).

There are several ironies in this scene, but the deepest is that Hamlet is now more like his mother than his father, and, at an unconscious level, this needles Hamlet. The gruesome character of the closet scene is that Hamlet's harsh admonishment of his mother is really an expression of self-hatred. Hamlet is seeking to excise something that is a part of himself; earlier in not killing Claudius when the opportunity arose, Hamlet betrayed his father as much as his mother ever did, and Hamlet knows this unconsciously. Hamlet projects onto his mother his own failure to serve his father dutifully. The mother and son share a common guilt, and Hamlet denies his by punishing his mother.

What do these examples show us about friendship, about Hamlet, and about Hamlet's tragedy? Here is the concept that the play allows us to grasp. Our parents serve as the "ideal types" that we use both to choose and to mediate our friendships, and I use the term "ideal types" much as Max Weber, the founder of interpretative sociological theory, uses the term. These ideal types that we gleam from our parents do not actually exist in concrete reality. Neither are they adequate descriptions of who our parents truly are. Nor are they representations of some metaphysical truth. They are simply those conceptual constructions of what friendship with our parents would be like if we were to have a friendship with our parents. Weber writes:

> Meaning may be of two kinds. The term may refer to the actual existing meaning in the given concrete case of a particular actor … ; or secondly to the theoretically conceived pure type of subjective meaning attributed to the hypothetical actor or actors in a given type of action. In no case does it refer to an objectively 'correct' meaning or one which is 'true' in some metaphysical sense.⁴

These ideal types, of which Weber speaks, serve us as conceptual constructions with respect to what intimacy and trust are, and we need these ideal types to understand the meaningfulness or lack of meaningfulness, the substance or lack of substance, that exists in our interpersonal relations.

For instance, were Hamlet not so estranged from his mother, he would likely be more open to the playful camaraderie of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. He would be less judgmental about their cavalier attitudes. Hamlet's friendship with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern was cemented at the university in their shared affection for what is pleasurable when Hamlet's relation to his mother was unproblematic.

In turn, were Hamlet not so grief stricken by the loss of his father, his feelings for Horatio might be less intense. His need for Horatio to compensate for his lost father-figure would be less intense. Indeed, Horatio's impulse to follow Hamlet to his death, to sacrifice himself in suicide, show that Horatio loves Hamlet much like a parent. "Here's yet some liquor left" (5.2.364), says Horatio, and Hamlet begs, "Absent thee from felicity awhile / And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain / To tell my story" (5.2.370-372).

These ideal types that stem from our hypothetical images of our parents as friends, we can use either positively or negatively, consciously or, as is more often the case, unconsciously. These ideal types may
represent a direct correspondence to the friendships that we form, or they may provide a contrasting or complementary difference. If our parents were humourless and formal, we may seek out witty and carefree friends. If our parents were playful and undisciplined, we may trust only people who are serious and moderate. Friendship is an identity-constructing relationship. It offers us an opportunity to rewrite our upbringing with our parents and either revise or enhance our attitude toward that upbringing.

Aristotle says that our parents are our friends, but, at the same time, he says that a sense of equality is essential to the formation of friendship. The relation of a child to a parent, no matter how much love and trust there is, is still essentially an unequal relation. Our parents will always precede us. Friendship, though, is based on a choice, a choice that affirms a certain sense of equity or proportional equality with respect to our affection for use, pleasure, virtue, or all three. “I am glad to see you well. / Horatio—or I do forget myself.” “The same, my lord, and your poor servant ever.” “Sir, my good friend—I'll change that name with you” (1.2.167-171). While there may be a socially structured inequality, a class stratification, between Horatio and Hamlet, at an interpersonal level this inequality is nonexistent.5

After the resounding success of the Gonzago play in exposing Claudius's guilt, Hamlet gets carried away and says to Horatio in an excited speech:

For thou dost know, O Damon dear,
Of Jove himself, and now reigns here

(3.2.292-96)

Jove is a reference to Hamlet's father, and pajock to his repulsive uncle, but notice that Hamlet refers to Horatio as his Damon, an allusion to that perfect friendship in Greek mythology. If Hamlet knows Horatio to be his Damon, then he also knows that he is Horatio's Phintias (not Pythias). In plotting to overthrow the tyrant Claudius (Dionysius in the original story), Hamlet believes that he can rely upon Horatio to save him from the consequences of his subversion.

Horatio replies to Hamlet's excited speech, “You might have rhymed” (3.2.297). From the perspective of the audience watching the play, this line is an instance of comic relief; from the perspective of the interaction between Horatio and Hamlet, it is an instance of good feedback. Hamlet is out of harmony, and his friend Horatio draws his attention to this fact.

Shortly after the Gonzago play Hamlet sees Claudius praying in the Chapel: an opportunity to kill his uncle and satisfy his father's demand for retribution. Hamlet, however, chooses not to kill his uncle, but not because he is afraid of killing. It is important to address the reason that Hamlet himself gives for his decision to defer this action. Hamlet imagines that to kill Claudius when he is praying could mean that his uncle's soul, despite his ignoble deeds, will go to heaven. Claudius now is seeking penitence. Hamlet decides to wait so that he may kill Claudius at a better time, when Claudius is actually doing something ignoble. Hamlet wants not only to destroy the body, but also to determine the fate of Claudius's soul, “That his soul may be as damned and black / As hell, whereto it goes” (3.3.97-98), a thought that horrified Dr. Johnson.9

Heroes are not good candidates for friendship, which is the hero's tragedy. Heroes resist the influence of their friends. Horatio would have disapproved, and we recall that the Ghost had cautioned Hamlet, “Taint not thy mind” (1.5.103). Aristotle writes:

This raises the question whether or not we wish our friends the greatest of all goods, namely to be gods. For (if that wish were fulfilled), they would no longer be our friends, and, since
friends are something good, we would have lost this good. Accordingly, if our assertion is
correct that a man wishes his friend's good for his friend's sake, the friend would have to
remain the man he was. Consequently, one will wish the greatest good for his friend as a
human being.7

Friends wish for a friend not as a god, but as a human being. With friends we choose humanity over divinity,
and this choice saves us.

Hamlet is grandiose when he takes it upon himself to be the one to determine the fate of his enemy's soul.
When Claudius concludes his guilt-ridden speech with the observation, “Words without thoughts never to
heaven go,” Claudius's words echo not so much on Claudius's own speech, which is both thoughtful and
poignant, but on Hamlet's distant and observing speech, which rationalizes the calculated decision not to kill
Claudius at this moment.

We began with the observation that there are two friendships that structure Hamlet, but there are actually
three. The third materializes only as Laertes and Hamlet die together. The undisclosed murder of Laertes'
innocent father, Polonius, and the inadequate Christian burial of Laertes' good sister, Ophelia, transform
Laertes into someone who shares much with Hamlet. “I tell thee, churlish priest, / A minist'r ing angel shall my
sister be / When thou liest howling” (5.1.235-7). Laertes, more than anyone, has the experiences which allow
him to empathize with Hamlet's rage and indignation. While less perfect than Horatio, Laertes is yet a better
candidate for friendship.

Hamlet utters a monstrously offensive line to Laertes, “I loved Ophelia. Forty thousand brothers / Could not
(with all their quantity of love) / Make up my sum. What wilt thou do for her?” (5.1.270-273). Hamlet's
remark is loveless. Since when does love quantify itself so as to compete with other measures of love?

If the highest achievement of friendship is the understanding of another through the act of forgiveness, then
Laertes and Hamlet, an enemy in the eyes of Laertes, die on the threshold of friendship. “Exchange
forgiveness with me, noble Hamlet / Mine and my father's death come not upon thee / Nor thine on me!”
(5.2.350-353). This exchange between two noble but fallible human beings makes the ending of this great
tragedy joyful. Hegel, a great admirer of Shakespeare, writes:

Breaking the hard heart and raising it to the level of universality is the same process which
was expressed in the case of the consciousness that openly made its confession. The wounds
of the spirit heal and leave no scars behind.8

Notes

2. *Hamlet* references are to *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare* (New York: Avenel Books,
MCMLXXV).
8. Hegel, G. W. F. “Evil and the forgiveness of it” in *The Phenomenology of Mind* (New York:
Criticism: Themes: Zdravko Planinc (essay date summer/winter 1998)


[In the following essay, Planinc contends that Hamlet is evidence that Shakespeare's abilities as a political philosopher are on par with those of Plato. Planinc asserts that both King Hamlet and King Claudius come up short as Platonic ideals, but that Shakespeare endowed Prince Hamlet with the greatness of mind to become Plato's philosopher-king.]

Shakespeare is as good a political philosopher as Plato. And if he had had a Socrates to write about, he would have been better. As it is, his portrayal of Hamlet, a contemplative prince struggling to attain intellectual and spiritual maturity, as well as his rightful crown, is as close as anything we have in literature to Plato's account of the difficult education of philosophers and the likelihood that they will become kings. And, in one important sense, Shakespeare's project is broader: he attempts to describe a contemplative king who transcends the distinction between pagan and Christian—someone of whom it could be said, taking him for all in all, “‘A was a man’ (1.2.187; 3.2.31-32)."

Shakespeare, like Plato, has no doctrine or theory to advance; his judgment of practical and political matters exists only in the particular. Consequently, like Plato, he does not write treatises; he writes in such a way that his judgment is always presented in action. The plays, like the Platonic dialogues, demand interpretation: we are only able to see Shakespeare's, or Plato's, mind at work if we exercise our own capacities for interpretive judgement. Not in just any manner either: a play like Hamlet is not a complicated ink-blot. Like the Republic, it is written to guide a reader's judgment toward a proper understanding of its meaning. Of course, it is also written to amuse a reader; but ultimately, it is meaningful, and its meaning is illuminated from within.

The political philosophy of Hamlet is distinctly Platonic in content as well as form. Like Plato, Shakespeare examines several related questions: What is the nature of politics? What is the nature of a human being? And what is the relation between them? The study of politics is conventionally divided into internal and external affairs: the order of the polity, or the regime, on the one hand; and war, on the other. Philosophic anthropology is similarly divisible into internal and external affairs: it studies the order of the soul, broadly understood; and the place of the human soul in a greater or transcendent order. Now, there are any number of improper relations between polities and souls. In the Republic they are contrasted with the proper relation; and the nature of the proper relation is discussed by way of a parallel between the just regime and the just soul—more specifically, by the possibility or the rule of the best.

These topics are all examined in Hamlet: not abstractly, but concretely; and not peripherally, but as questions central to the meaning of the play—something of the heart of its mystery. They will be discussed in turn. First, political science proper. Danish “external affairs” consists primarily of the possibility of war with Norway. And Danish “internal affairs,” the nature of the regime and the legitimacy of Claudius' rule. Next, the philosophic anthropology of the play: it consists almost entirely of the study of Hamlet's character. The proper order of the soul is something Hamlet himself must learn; and the soul's place in a transcendent order is a question he experiences immediately when confronting “this thing” (1.1.25)—perhaps a ghost, perhaps an angelic messenger, perhaps a devil (2.2.600)—this thing that “shakes [his] disposition / With thoughts beyond the reaches of [his soul]” (1.4.55-56). The Platonic parallel between polities and souls is also evident in the play. The disorder of the regime and the disorder of Hamlet's soul are matched; they can only be brought into order together. And the “external” threats to Denmark and to Hamlet are similarly matched. The Norwegian military threat and “this thing” are associated from the beginning of the play. To understand the nature of their relation, however, one must know the story of the Trojan horse.
From the First Player's recounting of the story in Act 2, we learn that there are Trojan horses of the soul just as there are Trojan horses in politics. Hamlet must learn this as a single lesson as well if he is to have any possibility of becoming fit to rule and winning his rightful crown.

I

THE TROJAN HORSE IN POLITICS

“... the Norweyan lord surveying vantage ...”

(Macbeth 1.2)

The character of Danish external affairs depends, in large part, on the character and military career of the previous king, Hamlet the Elder. He was a successful warrior, and in the Baltics as well. He had won a part of Norway by killing Fortinbras the Elder in single combat. His honor was at stake, so he was quite willing to wager a piece of Denmark for the contest; no other reason than honor-seeking is given for this bit of chivalry. In less chivalrous manner, Hamlet the Elder had also defeated the Poles; and we learn from Claudius that, late in his reign, he had also forced the English to pay tribute, perhaps with Claudius' military assistance (4.3.63-66). So he was something of a raider; in other words, a pirate to those he plundered. The English have a good deal of experience in such matters: as soon as Hamlet died, they stopped paying the tribute. And Fortinbras the Younger, also sensing weakness during the Danish succession, began to make plans to regain what Norway had lost to Denmark—and perhaps a bit more, perhaps as much as he could get. After all—his father killed, his country dishonored, a succession crisis and “right of memory” in Denmark that might be claimed (5.2.391), weak enemies throughout the region—why not?

Shakespeare obviously wants his audience to consider things, in the first instance, from the Danish point of view. But beneath all the easy claims to justice in such matters made in the play, there is a strong sense that all those who “puff” up their spirits with “divine ambition,” all those who “make mouths” and “find quarrel in a straw / When honor's at the stake” (4.4.50-57), are the same. Nevertheless, one must defend one's country if it is threatened. And Prince Hamlet, especially so; even if his country's worst enemy resembles his father, and might also be the kind of son his father would have preferred.

In the midst of hasty military preparations to meet the Norwegian threat, both Claudius and Hamlet put forward bids for the crown. The Danish council and Queen Gertrude both prefer Claudius, most likely because of his recent military successes against the English; though the natural successor, Hamlet is untried in war. Once king, Claudius' first act of state attempts to set things right. He dispatches two ambassadors, Cornelius and Voltimand, with a firmly worded letter to the elderly ruler of Norway. The details are familiar: when Fortinbras the Elder was killed, his son was too young to assume the throne, so his brother did—perhaps as Regent, perhaps not; now “old Norway,” as he is called, is bedridden, and ambitious Fortinbras is still not king, even though he is in his 30s. Fortinbras claims to be organizing an expedition against Poland in order to obtain funding—no reason need be given, since Poland is Catholic—but its real object is Denmark. Claudius' letter is intended to expose Fortinbras' true purpose to old Norway.

What appallingly bad, not to say rotten, judgment. What does Claudius think a letter will do? Can “impotent” old Norway, who has over Stayed his welcome on the throne and is soon to die anyway—can he wag his finger at Fortinbras, mouth a few banalities about justice, and dispel Fortinbras' ambitions and the desire for revenge that animates Norwegians? And would he? If he actually knew nothing of Fortinbras' intentions, would not Claudius' letter more likely cause him to desire one last go of it? And what does Claudius imagine slacking off military preparations will accomplish? True, Danes may get the impression that the threat has been handled effectively, but there has been no reply to the letter.
The ambassadors are gone for two months, a surprisingly long time given how close Norway is. When they return, they state simply that old Norway's finger-wagging was completely successful. What is more, Fortinbras was so penitent that he vowed “never more / To give th' assay of arms against [Denmark]” (2.2.70-71). And old Norway was so overjoyed by this sudden law-abidingness that he gave Fortinbras a goodly sum of money to fight the Poles anyway; that is, to undertake the military expedition that had had no real purpose in the first place.

Claudius and Polonius, his chief councilor, think the “business … well ended.” They even agree to the Norwegian request that Fortinbras' troops be given safe passage through Denmark on their way to Poland. Again, what appalling judgment. If the quick changes of heart and the seemingly pointless Polish campaign were not grounds enough for suspicion, any prudent military leader would have to pause and consider the risks of allowing foreign troops onto Danish soil. Not only would the Norwegians be free to survey the countryside, but Denmark would also be left exposed to attack by the battle-tested troops on their way home, perhaps even to attack on two frontiers. All these reasonable doubts are brought into focus by a single additional fact: the Norwegians do not wait for a reply to their request. Fortinbras' army leaves Norway for Denmark at the same time the ambassadors return. Now, why is it that Voltimand does not mention to the court that there are Norwegian ships just offshore that will land troops tomorrow?

It should be clear that Denmark is being offered a Trojan horse. The Norwegians are attempting to rout the Danes as the Greeks routed the Trojans. But where the Greeks concealed their soldiers physically as well as with lies, the Norwegians use lies alone; and the ambassadors act the part of Sinon. Claudius is far more gullible than Priam; and Fortinbras is as patient as the “hellish” Pyrrhus, “he whose sable arms, Black as his purpose, did the night resemble / When he lay couched in the ominous horse” (2.2.452-54).

But what of Hamlet? What is his role? Something is compelling him to slaughter Claudius, but that is Fortinbras' work: were Hamlet to satisfy his longing for vengeance, Denmark would fall as quickly as Troy. Something in Hamlet is also resisting the compulsion. He refuses to be Pyrrhus; but he does not recognize immediately that circumstances cast him in the role of Laocoon, the Trojan priest who was the only one, along with Cassandra, to warn Trojans of the danger. Had he been in court when the ambassadors returned, he might have sensed the trap right away. As it happens, it requires only a brief encounter with the landed troops to sober Hamlet. He quickly comes to understand that the two “adders fanged” who take him to his death are like the two serpents that killed Laocoon, and that he must somehow succeed where Laocoon failed.

It might be mentioned in passing that no one, it seems in the past 400 years has noted the obvious parallel between the political plot that frames Hamlet and the Trojan horse story recounted in such detail in Act 2. To paraphrase Claudius: so much for the scholarship.

II

"Hail, King! … compass'd with thy kingdom's pearl"

(Macbeth 5.7)

Claudius does not rule the way Priam ruled, not only because he is a lesser man, but primarily because the regime in which he rules is different. Insofar as anything is suggested about the regime, it is evident that Denmark is ruled by crown-in-council, and that the council is so well established that the monarchy might best be called an elective one. The authority of the crown is thus restricted. Not only by the council—often that is nothing more than the need for the monarch to obtain nodding approval from a chief councilor. The crown's authority is also restricted by the much more annoying necessity for the monarch's decrees to observe the rule of law. In order for Claudius to act politically as king, his will must take the form of a written text, the text must bear an official seal, and the substance of the text must be legal.
Such niceties might be overlooked in certain circumstances. In war, for instance, where the will of the king as military leader is far less fettered because domestic law does not apply, and perhaps also because a certain degree of illegality is necessary for success. And when a king is very successful in plundering other lands—as successful as the elder Hamlet, say—he might be able to persuade his subjects to allow him similar liberties at home. One senses that this is what happened during the reign of King Hamlet; the strength of his crown can be measured by the weakness of Polonius. By the time Claudius assumed the throne, the institutions of rule by crown-in-council had grown somewhat tarnished from disuse. But they had not been abandoned.

The most significant feature that distinguishes the Danish regime, no matter how distorted by neglect, from any ancient kingdom can be stated simply: the Danish king has “two bodies.” Unlike an ancient king, whose authority is identical with his person, the Danish king is simultaneously, but independently a person and the head of the body politic. His actions as a man and his actions as a king are distinct. His actions as a man do not count as the monarch's will. And furthermore, if the body politic refuses to accept any of his royal actions as lawful, it may dismiss them as private acts, if it is willing to face the consequences. In other words, even though it may precipitate a civil war, in such circumstances a parliamentary institution may separate the body politic from the king's person and invest it in another person before separating, quite legally, the king's own body into two pieces. This may not be Plato or Vergil, but it is a common enough theme in the Tudor and Stuart periods.

Despite the dangers, Claudius is willing to murder his brother in a bid for the crown. Had it been detected, his regicide would have been punishable by death. As it stands, it is a fact eventually known to only two people, and impossible to prove without a rather unlikely public confession. Given that Claudius successfully becomes king, the matter becomes more complicated. Once he heads the body politic, how can he be punished? And who has the authority to do so? One's heart is with Hamlet, of course; and Claudius is a vile and petty man. Nevertheless, if one were forced to choose between Hamlet raging for “private” vengeance—not public justice—and Claudius as an established king defending the realm in difficult times, one would unfortunately have to choose Claudius. Is he not right to worry about all possible threats to his authority, especially given that any civil disruption could only benefit the Norwegians? And is he not right to suspect Hamlet's behaviour? After all, during his play's performance before the court, Hamlet noisily takes over the role of Lucianus the regicide, nephew—not brother—to the king. Madness is no excuse: Junius Brutus also feigned madness for political reasons.

Fortunately, we are not forced to side with Claudius. Hamlet is not only a man, he is the Crown Prince. He need not act against Claudius alone; there is the council to assist him. But on what grounds can he appeal to the council? The murder of the elder Hamlet cannot be proven. However, the attempted murder of the younger Hamlet can be: “There's letters sealed” (3.4.209), and what they contain can depose a king. When Claudius stamps the royal seal on a death warrant for the Crown Prince, ordering him to be executed in a foreign state under tribute, without council approval, without a public declaration of his reasons, and without a public trial, he oversteps even the most generous estimate of his prerogative. His act is illegal. The world being what it is, Claudius would be able to get away with murdering Hamlet; but the regime being what it is, he cannot get away with attempting to murder Hamlet. All Hamlet need do—beyond surviving the attempt—is produce the evidence and begin proceedings against Claudius for the deed, “so crimeful and so capital in nature” (4.7.7). And when he returns to Denmark with the sealed commission in his hands and announces himself “Hamlet the Dane”—that is, the rightful king—it is evident that he has every intention of going to “a public count” (4.7.18).

Before Hamlet can truly proclaim himself “the Dane,” however, he must become fit to rule; and that is a spiritual matter, not a legal or political one.

III
The significance of these remarks for understanding Hamlet's madness is straightforward. When “this thing” appears to Hamlet, it does not present him with an epistemological problem to solve; it is an event in his soul.
that “horridly … shakes [his] disposition,” leaving him a “fool,” confused “With thoughts beyond the [reach] of [his] soul” (1.4.54-56). The “thing” itself, its very nature, is the immediate cause of Hamlet's madness. Before it speaks a word, Hamlet understands that it demands a response: “Why is this? Wherefore? What should we do?” (57). And when it does speak, Hamlet's experience of disorder only intensifies. It “prey[s] on garbage” in Hamlet's soul—all of his resentment, worldly ambition, pride, self-righteousness, things in his soul that are “rank and gross”—and it tests his virtue by courting him with “lewdness … in a shape of heaven” (1.5.54-58; 1.2.136). It not only tells him the shocking fact of his father's murder, along with rather surprising news about the judgement of his father's soul; it also reveals its intent in speaking these things—to bind him to revenge as firmly as he is bound to love.

Hamlet's uncertainty about the nature of “this thing”—“spirit of health or goblin damned”—is, in part, an uncertainty about the authority of his reason. There is a very reliable indicator of Hamlet's rationality at any moment in the play: his relation to Horatio. As the pun in his name suggests, Horatio is the very embodiment of rationality. But of what kind? Although he studies at Wittenberg, Luther's university, Shakespeare does not intend Horatio to represent the fideistic notion of reason. He is more “antique Roman” than Lutheran. Shakespeare quite deliberately uses the changing relation between Hamlet and Horatio in the play to illustrate the changing relation between the spiritual and the rational within Hamlet's own soul; but Shakespeare's understanding of the soul's proper order owes more to Plato than it does even to Cicero or Plutarch, to say nothing of Luther.

Compare two similar scenes, one from the beginning and one from the end of the play. In Act I, when Hamlet first confronts the “thing,” Horatio worries that it might “deprive [his] sovereignty of reason,” drawing him into madness, and insists that Hamlet “Think” and “Be ruled” (1.4.73-81). Sound advice. But when Horatio thinks such matters “wondrous strange,” Hamlet properly reminds him: “There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, / Than are dreamt of in your philosophy” (1.5.173-76). In Act 5, when Hamlet speaks of the “ill … about [his] heart,” Horatio advises him to “obey” his “mind[']s dislikes”; but Hamlet rejects such “antique Roman” rationalism as no better than “augury,” and prefers instead an openness to providence, a spiritual “readiness” that is “all” (5.2.210-22).

If reason alone were to judge, Hamlet's refusal to be ruled is as mad in the latter scene as it is in the former. It is, perhaps, in degree; but that does not make it the same madness. When Hamlet returns to Denmark, he is a different man. He is no longer troubled by his experience of the “thing”; it no longer moves him one way or another. Indeed, he lingers in the graveyard and feels no more than the normal revulsion. But the transformation that has occurred during his voyage—the “sea change” in his soul—is something more than the return of reason to its proper seat of authority. Hamlet's soul suffers from a different mania that does not disorder the soul; rather, it allows the soul to discover a new order, and a new authority for reason in that order. Reason can do more to bring about the experiences that cause such madness than any other part of the soul can; they are suffered. However, reason can recognize their authority once they occur.

In the play's most overt symbolic presentation of such an understanding, Horatio allows himself to be ruled by the authority of Hamlet's spiritual “readiness.” In a more subtle statement of the same understanding, the Hamlet who appears in Act 5 has succeeded in placing Horatio “in [his] heart's core, … in [his] heart of hearts” (3.2.72). And what is more, he has succeeded in attaining the “godlike reason” (4.4.39) of which he spoke so longingly before embarking on his voyage to England.

The soliloquy in which Hamlet longs for “godlike reason” and compares himself to the “delicate” Prince Fortinbras—whose “spirit” is so “puffed” up with “ambition” that he would reenact the fall of Troy—recalls an earlier soliloquy in which an equally bloody-minded Hamlet orders his “brain” to turn about after comparing himself to the somewhat more delicate First Player, who only recites the story of the fall of Troy. In the later soliloquy, Hamlet complains that he does not act even though he has “cause, and will, … and means” to do so (4.4.46). It is his reason that holds him back, even though it cannot yet suggest a proper
cause, will and means for action. In the earlier soliloquy, Hamlet complains that even an actor can make his "conceit," his "soul" and his "visage" conform to one another, though the motives for such harmony of mind, soul and action are not his own. It is Hamlet's proper spirit that prevents him from acting like Pyrrhus—his spirit, and his profound doubt about the motives being suggested to him. When Hamlet returns to Denmark, both the "exterior" and the "inward" man have been transformed again; and he finally knows how he will act.

IV

"What! Can the devil speak true?"

(\textit{Macbeth} 1.3)

What is "this thing," this Trojan horse of the soul? A great deal has been written in an attempt to answer this question on doctrinal or dogmatic grounds. It cannot be done. There is an answer to the question, but it favors no particular religious denomination. Shakespeare's understanding of the mysteries of the transcendent order and its influences upon human beings is nothing so simple as a doctrine.

To begin with a simple fact: all things that might be said to make up a transcendent order are not the same simply because they are transcendent. "Ghosts" are not the same as "angels" or "devils"; in other words, the souls or spirits of dead human beings are not the same as the various manifestations of a transcendent order to the human soul. Another simple fact: there ain't no such thing as ghosts. Whatever else might be said about an afterlife aside, no one returns from the dead. Hamlet understands this in one of his most lucid moments: he says death is an "undiscovered country from whose bourn / No traveler returns" (3.1.80-81). This leaves angels and devils, or the profound experiences of good and evil that living human beings symbolize by such words.

Angels and devils are said to "appear." This may suggest that they appear to the senses, in the physical realm, but they do not. Angels and devils have no corporeal bodies; in other words, the experiences these words describe occur only in the soul; there is nothing physical about them, though they may have physical consequences. Yet people find themselves compelled to speak of such experiences as "appearances." Several reasons suggest themselves for this: first, the experiences, by their very nature, are unexpected—even though one might prepare for them, one must suffer them; second, the experiences suggest an even greater source, of which they are only manifestations; third, the substance, character or meaning of such experiences is not immediately evident; and finally, all language unavoidably concretizes experience. Hence, the need to speak of appearances, even when concerned with essences.

Angels and devils therefore do not appear to us as they are. But they do appear in a way that suits their purpose and the occasion. What then of "this thing's" appearance? If it is not the spirit of Hamlet the Elder escaped from some Purgatory, Hades or other middling province in death's dominion—as it cannot be—then either an angel or a devil appears in this way to suit its purpose. It takes Hamlet most of the play to determine which it is—and not surprisingly, given the nature of the mania it causes.

When Hamlet first confronts it, he immediately distinguishes, as did Horatio, between what it might be and how it appears:

\begin{verbatim}
Be thy intentions wicked or charitable …
Bring with thee airs from heaven or blasts from hell …
Thou com'st in such a questionable shape
That I will speak to thee. I'll call thee Hamlet …
\end{verbatim}

(1.4.41-44)
He allows the “shape,” though “questionable,” to influence him; or, more precisely, he discovers himself to be open to its intentions, and he is therefore willing to accept its shape as true. His initial terror gives way to a terrifying willingness to be ruled by it. And what are its intentions? In the words Hamlet later recites before the Players, it asks him to become like “hellish Pyrrhus,” to take revenge on Claudius and to revel in the consequences—the fall of Denmark. It asks him to coat himself “Head to foot / … With the blood of fathers, mothers, daughters, sons,” and to allow the fires of a burning Elsinore to “bake” and “impaste” the blood until he becomes “o'ersized with coagulate gore” (2.2.456-63).

Half his heart would do it. The other half would not. He refuses to succumb to its influence entirely. But he also cannot simply “throw away the worser part of [his heart] / And live the purer with the other half” (3.4.164-65). The mania that “this thing” causes in him is not something a human heart can resist alone.

The head must be allied with the heart; reason must have its proper place if the soul is to be ordered. But reason too can be deceived, and often more readily than the heart. The easiest way to deceive reason is to offer it the truth. Reason alone does not know that the truth spoken for the wrong reason is a lie in the soul; that is the soul's understanding. And Hamlet's reason is deceived in just this way. His reason is a powerful ally for his heart because it rightly reminds him that, “The spirit [he] has seen / May be the devil, and the devil hath power / T'assume a pleasing shape” (2.2.599-600). But his reason also leaves his heart defenseless when it takes the bait of truth the spirit offers: the fact that Claudius killed his brother to obtain the crown. Hamlet cannot get this fact out of his mind. His doubts about the nature of the thing he has seen also cause him to doubt this fact as well, to search for “grounds more relative,” for rational proof. But when he gets “proof,” when Claudius rises during the play, Hamlet's satisfied reason deserts his heart. “O good Horatio,” he says, “I'll take the ghost's word for a thousand pound” (3.2.284-85). More than at any other time, Hamlet accepts the thing as “an honest ghost” (1.5.144) and opens his heart to its influence: “Now could I drink hot blood” (3.2.389).

This is no honest ghost. Like the Trojan horse, it appears to be a sacred thing, but its appearance conceals a “hellish” intent. This ghostly or spiritual Trojan horse seems to be an angelic messenger taking the form of old Hamlet, but it is actually a demon intent on corrupting Hamlet's soul—with the truth if need be—and then unleashing him in Denmark as Pyrrhus was unleashed in Troy.

Hamlet faces a difficult problem: how can head and heart combine to resist such a demonic influence? Separately they come to nothing: rational rigor is as ineffectual as a fanatical attempt to expunge all evil from the soul. Even together, they require assistance; but of what sort? Prayer suggests itself. However, the only prayer Shakespeare gives us in the play is Claudius' soliloquy, “O, my offense is rank, it smells to heaven” (3.3.284-85)—a wonderful example of utter hypocrisy. Claudius' prayer can be described in the choice words of that other hypocrite, Polonius:

We are oft to blame in this—
'Tis too much proved—that with devotion's visage
And pious action we do sugar o'er
The devil himself.

(3.1.46-49)

To which Claudius hypocritically answers, “‘Tis too true.”

Hamlet does not pray. But he is a contemplative by nature. And what is contemplation if not prayer without the outward visage and pious action? Contemplation properly done, that is; since it too may be hypocritical. In a meditative or contemplative exercise, the head and heart together attempt to create a proper order in the soul by orienting it toward a transcendent good or God. If all goes well, there is sometimes a response. In Christian
terms, sometimes an angel appears. Hamlet does contemplate in the play, sometimes poorly and sometimes well. An angel does appear to him; and its appearance is the spiritual event that finally allows him to attain “godlike reason.”

Hamlet's contemplative or meditative exercises are presented in his soliloquies. Now, not all soliloquies are contemplative exercises: a soliloquy simply portrays the inward man—not always a pleasant sight. But several of Hamlet's show him practicing the “art of dying.” When Hamlet first appears in the play, before his encounter with the spirit, he is presented as attempting to rise above all that is “rank and gross,” all that is worldly, all that partakes of “this too too sullied flesh.” He attempts to move toward God, but he fails because he cannot put it all beneath him; he cannot stop remembering; more specifically, he cannot stop participating in all that is rank and gross in his own soul. In the end, all he can manage is a barely endurable silence (1.2.129-59). After he encounters the spirit, his troubles are far worse. And yet he somehow succeeds in rising above everything in the soliloquy beginning, “To be, or not to be …” (3.1.57ff), rising, indeed, to the very point of recognizing the true nature of the thing that claims to be a “traveler” returning from the “undiscovered country.” Again, he fails to sustain the spiritual ascent, this time because of the trap for which Ophelia consented to serve as bait. It is only when things are at their worst that Hamlet's contemplative longings succeed in reaching their end. His success is not shown on-stage; the audience learns of it later, with Horatio.

It is only when Hamlet immediately confronts death while aboard the ship for England that all things of the flesh, things worldly and demonic, finally “resolve [themselves] into a dew” (1.2.130). The consequence of such a resolution is the spiritual “readiness” that is “all” and the “godlike reason” that is illuminated by such readiness. The consequence is not a pure heart, free of its “worser half.” Things remain “ill … about [Hamlet's] heart”—partly because being “sick at heart” is inescapable for mortals, and partly because the “divinity that shapes our ends,” when it appeared in the midst of the “fighting” in Hamlet's heart that would not allow him to rest, acted “rashly” and roughly (1.1.9; 5.2.4-11, 210-11).

V

When Hamlet returns to Denmark, he has undergone as has been often remarked, a “sea change.” The ambitions of Alexander the Great are as nothing to him. In the spirit of Yorick the jester who played with him when his father did not, the only properly ambitious man in his father's court—Hamlet even composes a rhyme about “Imperious Caesar,” who,

... dead and turned to clay,
Might stop a hole to keep the wind away.
O, that the earth which kept the world in awe
Should patch a wall t' expel the winter's flaw!

(5.1.213-16)

And yet Hamlet is not simply a contemplative soul, turned away from the things that are Caesar's. He recognizes that, while he “draw[s] breath,” he must act in “this harsh world” (5.2.350). He recognizes that he must act justly; not from pride or self-righteousness, and certainly not from the demonic passions that had troubled him. What is more, he must act justly as the Crown Prince. His duty to Denmark requires him to act as Laocoon acted, warning Trojans of the lies that conceal the dangers within the horse at their gates. But he must succeed where Laocoon failed. If success requires the death of two “adders fanged,” so be it: Rosencrantz and Guildenstern need not trouble his conscience (3.4.210; 5.2.58). And if it requires the deposition of Claudius, let that come as well. The right “cause, and will, … and means” present themselves for it (4.4.46): a council no longer hindered by Polonius and made sober by proof of Claudius' incompetent military judgment can readily be persuaded to divest him of the “body politic” once it is presented with...
sufficient legal grounds—namely, the sealed commission. The order for Hamlet's execution is illegal. The order for Claudius' execution need not be. In Claudius’ own words: “where th’ offense is, let the great ax fall” (4.5.221). And if this settles all worldly debts between them, so much the better.

The Hamlet who returns to Denmark and announces himself “the Dane” is not only a true contemplative, but also a true king. His spiritual “readiness” is not resignation, but rather a spiritual dispensation that combines the *vita contemplativa* and the *vita activa* perfectly: Plato’s philosopher-king; but also something else. In the words of the gospel of Matthew (10:16 ff. [Geneva edition]) that Shakespeare is also concerned to understand, Hamlet's dispensation makes him as “wise” as a “serpent,” and as “innocent” as a “dove.” It makes him fit to rule others. However, the world remains “harsh” even when one attains the “readiness” to meet its harshness. Hamlet is wary of men, of their councils and kings, but in Act 5 he goes to encounter them anyway, “tak[ing] no thought how or what [he] shall speak.” For he knows that “it shall be given [him] in that hour what [he] shall say.” He fears neither those “which kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul,” nor “him, which is able to destroy both soul and body in hell.” And his “readiness” will finally allow “the spirit of [the] father” to speak in him.2

Notes

1. All references will be from *Hamlet*, ed. David Bevington *et al.* (NY: Bantam, 1988).

2. Earlier drafts of this address were given to the Canadian Political Science Association, the Political Science Department of McMaster University and the Toronto chapter of the Conference for the Study of Political Thought. My sincere thanks to all participants.

Criticism: Themes: Reta A. Terry (essay date winter 1999)


*In the following essay, Terry outlines the ways in which Shakespeare used the characters of Horatio, Laertes, and Hamlet to reflect England's notion of honor as it shifted from the chivalric code of the medieval period to one based on the individual's relationship to the state.*

Contemporary Shakespearean scholars have demonstrated a renewed interest in both Renaissance concepts of honor and the historical context that surrounds these concepts.1 In practical terms, this means that critics attempting to understand a literary text by placing it within the context of its creation must cross the constructed boundaries that exist between literary texts and historical documents, whether they be sermons, tracts, government papers, private letters, published or unpublished works, all of which are themselves texts. The study of honor in Shakespeare’s drama, then, must include an examination of the way that honor was referred to in a multiplicity of texts. This is not to say that an historical context can be entirely recreated and thus provide a definitive meaning or interpretation that is ascribable to Shakespeare's plays. The recognition that history cannot be completely knowable is, in part, what separates New Historicism from former historical approaches to literature. However, an examination of the way honor was written about in other texts of the period allows for some general conclusions regarding the evolution of the honor code and Shakespeare's role in representing and defining that code. Moreover, analysis of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, and in particular its characters’ use of promise, provides new and revealing insights into evolving Renaissance codes of honor.2 The heretofore unexplored relationship between honor and promise in *Hamlet* deserves attention for it is through the use of promise that Shakespeare's characters define rival and evolving conceptions of what it meant to be an honorable man.
Honor, like other intangible and abstract terms such as love or faith, is difficult both to define and to discern. In fact, the OED contains over ten main definitions of honor that are applicable to the Elizabethan period. Yet, integral to the early modern honor code was, and is, the word, and Shakespeare's use of the word of honor—of promise—can be examined in order to discern the shifting concept of honor itself. Specifically, according to Mervyn James, “the importance of ‘promise’ was that this gave the essence of honor, will and intention (340);” Shakespeare's characters' concepts of honor can be perceived in the ways in which they use, and respond to, promise. Thus, a close examination of Shakespeare's use of promise in Hamlet yields some valuable conclusions regarding the honor codes that both shape Shakespeare's works and are shaped by them.

The Renaissance was a period of transition in the evolution of the code of honor. One of the most complex changes in the code of honor was a move from an external code to an internalized concept of what it is to be an honorable man. Men were no longer considered honorable simply by right of birth, nor were they able to claim to be men of honor by producing a long list of heroic deeds. Rather, honor was becoming, by the seventeenth century, a matter of conscience; honorable men needed to seek, in every situation, to behave in such a way as to please both their state and their God. That is not to say that there did not exist a residual chivalric sense of honor which emphasized the importance of blood and lineage as well as martial prowess. Rather, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries this medieval concept of honor both co-existed and overlapped with a more modern code of honor which simultaneously emphasized both godliness and political allegiance to the collective state. This new code, in turn, created tensions of its own precisely because of its demand that men act both in accordance to the dictates of their conscience and their duty to the state. Put simply, Renaissance men had to cope with both an old, medieval code of honor and the tensions of a new one, tensions that were created, to a large degree, by the contemporary insistence on the importance of the individual conscience.

In 1599, the anonymous writer of a pamphlet entitled Fancies Ague-fittes, or Beauties Nettle-bed finds it necessary to aver that “Honour is nothing els but populare reputation, it is no parte of the conscience” (16). This enters a Renaissance discourse of the conscience, and it enters against the proliferation of courtesy literature that urged men to examine their consciences before taking any act, or to act in consultation with God's “counsell.” For example, William Perkins writes in 1612 that “whatsoever is not done of a setled perswasion in judgement and conscience out of Gods word, howsoever men judge of it, is sinne” (1:537). In particular, by 1597 John Norden was urging in his address to the reader that

all militaire men ought to haue continuall council and consultation with the God of armies [the Christian God], disclayming their owne wisdomes, judgements and valore, and to followe what is commanded in, or agreeth with his word.

(2)

For Norden, as for many writers of this period, all men, even military men, should examine their conscience to ensure that their actions, even in battle, coincide with the Word of God. That is not to say that medieval soldiers and chivalric knights were unconcerned with virtue. But, according to Maurice Keen, “it is as an essentially secular figure that the chivalrous knight steps onto the stage of history.” By 1630, as Richard Braithwaite noted, the exhortations concerning honor and conscience had transformed the notion, for some, of honorable behavior:

we have in these declining dayes, among so many proud Symeons, many humble Josephs, whose chiefest honour they make it to abase themselves on earth, to adde to their complement of glory in heaven, so much slighting the applause of men, as their only aime is to have a sincere and blamelesse conscience in them.

(63-64)
That the Elizabethan concept of honor came to encompass the internal conscience is well-documented. This emphasis on the conscience, within both drama and society, forced men to balance obedience to the State with adherence to Christian virtues of patience and forgiveness that could be found within God's word. In other words, there exists in this period a conflict of conscience between obedience to God and to the state which often required violent military action, and adherence to an honor code that demanded Christian patience, long-suffering, and non-violent resolutions to conflict. It is this attempt both to please the state and God and to remain honorable that leads to Hamlet's crisis of conscience and, ultimately, to his tragic death. Nevertheless, even with the internalization of honor the concept of promise did not diminish. One's word remained inherent in the code of honor precisely because honor as a political and moral consideration required, even more than before, a public statement of intent. It is the essence of honor, manifest in promise, that Shakespeare questions when he creates the characters in Hamlet.

Although Shakespeare's later tragedies, especially Othello, demonstrate a clear demarcation between several types of promise (oaths and swearing for example) in Hamlet these two terms can be taken to mean what Frances Shirley defines as “the calling to witness something, divine or otherwise, to seal vows of allegiance and promises of love or to attest the truth of a statement” (xi). An oath in Hamlet, then, is simply an invocation of a higher power to bear witness to the truth of a statement.

In Shakespearean tragedy, oaths function structurally to develop characterization and move the action toward its climax. Although Hamlet can, of course, withdraw from his oath of vengeance without a threat to his honor should he discover that the ghost is, in fact, not truthful, when he swears that the ghost's commandment to seek revenge “all alone shall live / Within the book and volume of my brain / Unmixed with baser matter! Yes, by heaven” (1.5.102-4), the prince is, in effect, stripped of his power to stop the events. He is a man of honor, a noble man, and now that the vow is spoken he has no choice but to carry it through. Thomas points out that “Protestant teaching seems to have been remarkably firm” (702) when it came to denying the existence of the ghosts of dead men, but after the play within the play Hamlet is committed. The evidence of Claudius's guilt that Hamlet perceives in the king's reaction, which causes Hamlet to publicly exclaim, “O good Horatio, I'll take the ghost's word for a thousand pound” (3.2.260-61), removes the possibility that Hamlet can be dishonored by his belief in ghosts. In fact, The Mousetrap scene in Hamlet is an example of the knightly and chivalric honorable tradition whereby a man's honor can be either lost or won by surviving an ordeal designed to determine his guilt. As Thomas explains, the “ordeal is not usually invoked until the suspect has already been identified. It is merely an additional test of his guilt, not the initial means of discovering the criminal” (260). Hamlet cleverly devises an ordeal for Claudius, the already-discovered criminal, in order to prove Claudius's guilt without having to depend on the ghost's word. In so doing, Hamlet unwittingly brings together both the chivalric code of honor and the more modern moralized one; Shakespeare exempts Hamlet from being dependent upon the word of a ghost, which in Protestant theology would define him as dishonorable, by using the chivalric concept of the ordeal. Ironically, then, Hamlet uses the chivalric code to make himself honorable in the more modern concept of honor. Moreover, Hamlet's use of aspects of both an older idea of honor and a new one demonstrates the way in which these codes overlap in an evolving honor code.

In investing Hamlet with a concern to meet the demands of this evolving honor code, Shakespeare foreshadows the events of the drama while simultaneously divesting his main character of power. Shakespeare's careful delineation of Hamlet as Horatio's “honoured lord” (1.2.221), as a man who inspires “Our duty to your honour” (1.2.253), and as a lover who has approached Ophelia “with love / In honourable fashion” (1.3.16) makes clear that if Hamlet swears revenge against his father's murderer, then as a man of honor in the chivalric tradition, he must carry out that revenge no matter the cost. But, as Anita Pacheco notes, “Shakespeare's treatment of honor develops not out of a unified perspective, but out of the cultural diversity generated by rival ethical legacies” (93). Hamlet's tragedy is, in part, that he is forced to attempt to balance these “rival ethical legacies” as he struggles to remain honorable.
It is significant that Hamlet swears revenge in soliloquy; his oath is not public, nor does it ever become so. According to William Slights, oaths express a “desire to transform a private emotion into a public bond” (151). Moreover, James points out that honor is a public commitment through the “freely given word,” and that the significance of a given honorable situation arises “out of the nature of honor as a public code, the public status distinguishing it from a private morality.”

By keeping private his oath to gain revenge upon Claudius, by refusing to enter the public arena of oath and honor, Hamlet's honor is seemingly not dependent upon his ability to slay his father's murderer precisely because honor is a public code. But, his swearing of revenge in a soliloquy—a dramatic element that uniquely combines both the public and the private—does not necessarily imply that his honor is not at stake, because the Renaissance concept of honor was evolving into a more internal code; Hamlet's honor has become as much a matter of his own conscience as of public recognition. Hamlet's soliloquy underscores the tension that exists between public and private honor. His oath, known to the audience but not to the other characters, exemplifies Shakespeare's entrance into the discourse of honor precisely because it allows the audience to discern Hamlet's crisis of conscience while simultaneously publicly committing the prince to revenge; since the audience hears the promise they may expect Hamlet, a nobleman, to keep his word.

In fact, a close examination of the concepts of promise and honor in *Hamlet* reveals that the major characters in this play represent different stages in the evolution of a changing code of honor. Moreover, this representation would not have been missed by a typical Shakespearean audience for “to a conscientious Christian living in late sixteenth-century England, the formal oath was an especially powerful form of utterance.” In fact, there exists in this period a plethora of texts that emphasized the difference between careful and casual swearing in an attempt to elucidate the dishonor involved in the casual use of promise. As early as 1579 Edmond Bicknoll was indignantly asking his parishioners if there “was ever any age so outrageous in Othes? So blasphemous in railing? So rooted in perjury?” (3). In 1583 Philip Stubbes advises that the “blessed word of God, is to be handled reverently, gravely, and sagely with veneration to the glorious majestie of God” (1). Gervase Babington, also in 1583, points out that “In the Newe Testement we are forbidden to sweare at all, not because all swearing is a sinne, but because forswearing is an horrible sinne” (131). Babington was not entirely against swearing. Rather, he wanted to caution his readers about the casual use of swearing, for

> the thing wee sweare by, wee make it the greatest of all other, wee make it the witnesse and discerner of our trueth wee meane, and the reuenger of falsehoode and our fault if we doe not as wee sweare, all which to bee giuen to the Lorde by swearing onley by Him, is a glory to him, and contraiwise a dishonour to him to ascribe them elsewhere, since indeede they are not incident to anie creature

(133).

William Perkins, writing in 1593, concurs with Babington when he advises that “Gods name should only be uttered upon a weightie and just occasion, so we may plainly see that glory will redound to him thereby” (6). This elucidation of casual and careful swearing, in turn, underscores the metamorphosis in the honor code since it demonstrates the change in the use of the word. Put simply, the discourse of honor prevalent in these texts clearly argues that promise, and thus honor, was changing, for man's word was no longer either trustworthy nor honorable.

In *Hamlet*, Horatio represents the chivalric, medieval concept of honor. Horatio is utterly loyal and obedient to the man he addresses as his “honoured lord” (1.2.221), Hamlet. All five of Horatio's oaths (all in act 1) are made in relation to Hamlet himself. More importantly, Horatio keeps his word to Hamlet throughout the play. Horatio uses two oaths following his encounter with the ghost. First, he attempts to force the ghost to articulate its nature and purpose in Denmark: “By heaven I charge thee speak” (1.1.48). After the ghost exits,
Horatio, pale and frightened by his experience, insists that “Before my God, I might not this believe / Without the sensible and true avouch / Of mine own eyes” (1.1.56-58). While this oath does not seem, at first, to be related to Hamlet, it is important to note that Horatio's two oaths are immediately followed by a discussion of Fortinbras's advance on Denmark and the danger the country faces as a result of his incursion. And, since Shakespeare painstakingly makes it clear that Horatio is not Danish, and that his only connection to Denmark is his friendship with Hamlet, it is clear that the oaths uttered by Horatio are out of a concern for Hamlet, his “fellow student” (1.2.177) and friend. Thus, after sighting the ghost a second time, Horatio determines that Hamlet must be told of the apparition immediately, and Horatio's decision leads him to the use of a third oath: “Upon my life / This spirit dumb to us, will speak to him [Hamlet]” (1.1.170-71).

Significantly, Horatio's next, and last, two oaths are uttered directly to Hamlet and at the prince's request. Following Hamlet's own encounter with the ghost, Horatio begs Hamlet to divulge what the ghost has said. Hamlet refuses, fearing Horatio will make the conversation public. Horatio quickly swears secrecy: “Not I my lord, by heaven” (1.5.118). Hamlet does not agree to tell Horatio what the spirit has said, but asks Horatio once more if he can be trusted, to which Horatio again swears, “Ay, by heaven, my lord” (1.5.123). Finally, although Horatio never takes an oath of secrecy on Hamlet's sword within the text, it is clear that the stage action calls for such an oath, for after the repeated requests of both Hamlet and the ghost itself Horatio expresses his willingness to swear when he invites Hamlet to “Propose the oath my lord” (1.5.153).

The medieval code of honor was based on loyalty and allegiance to one's lord. In fact, according to Maurice Keen, “to betray one's lord has from the earliest days of chivalry and before been held the darkest of all crimes with which the knight or warrior could be charged” (175). Not only does Horatio repeatedly refer to Hamlet as his lord, and not only does he keep his word by not divulging Hamlet's secret until Hamlet himself withdraws the request, but Horatio also expresses a willingness to die with Hamlet after the prince is wounded by Laertes' poisoned rapier. More importantly, Horatio makes absolutely clear the notion that the code of honor is changing and that he himself is representative of the old code when he attempts to drink the poisoned wine after it becomes obvious that Hamlet's wounds are fatal: “I am more antique Roman than a Dane. / Here's yet some liquor yet (5.2.320-21). Horatio emphasizes that he is an “antique” Roman; he lives by an older or “Roman” code of honor that requires the ultimate allegiance and obedience to his lord. Moreover, he recognizes that this code is changing when he makes the distinction between the “antique” Roman and the more modern Dane, but nevertheless strongly adheres to the ancient code, even ending his own attempt to commit suicide on Hamlet's behalf when Hamlet utters an oath of his own: “As th'art a man / Give me the cup. Let go, by heaven I'll ha't” (5.2.322-23).

Hamlet orders Horatio to relinquish the cup and, significantly, bases Horatio's obedience upon masculinity, for honor in this period was exclusively a male domain. Women's honor almost entirely consisted of their chastity or, if they were maidens, their virginity. This, in turn, was merely a manifestation of male honor itself as a woman's chastity brought honor to her husband or father by demonstrating his ability to command her obedience. Or, in Mark Breitenberg's words, “women are a transacted property, or their chastity is a badge of honor for their husbands, validated only when other men desire to steal it” (71). Thus, when Hamlet charges Horatio, upon his manhood, to give up the cup, he is, in effect, challenging Horatio's masculinity; if Horatio wants to be seen as masculine, he must obey his master's command.

Laertes also struggles with the changing concept of what constitutes male honor, but Laertes represents a further stage in the developing concept of honor. Laertes, unlike Horatio, swears only once in the entire text of the play; he swears revenge for Ophelia's madness when he tells her: “By heaven, thy madness shall be paid with weight / Till our scale turn the beam” (4.5.156-57). Laertes' father, like Hamlet's, has been murdered, and Laertes' instant and violent reaction bespeaks the old chivalric code of honor. According to Curtis Watson, Laertes' vow reflects “the quick sensitivity to affront which the Renaissance period had acquired from Aristotle through his numerous Renaissance disciples” (362). Likewise, Norman Council labels Laertes' reaction a “single-minded commitment to honorable revenge” (93). Yet Laertes, like Horatio, is aware that the
Honor code is changing. In fact, he consciously rejects the more modern, moralized codes of honor in his angry response to the news of Polonius's death:

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 throughly for my father.

(4.5.129-34)

Laertes is willing to ignore his conscience and to burn in hell (the consequence of murder) in order to avenge (an act of honor in the old code) his father's death.

But, unlike Horatio, Laertes does not make public promises. Rather, although he tells Claudius that he would be willing to “cut” his father's murderer's “throat i'th'church” (4.7.125), he never actually swears to revenge Polonius's murder. Thus, Laertes' immediate desire for violence, coupled with his obvious loyalty to the memory of his father and his conscious rejection of an honor code that includes moral behavior, places him close to the medieval code of honor while his refusal to make his oath of vengeance publicly and his willingness to be ruled by the head of the body politic place his idea of honor further along the continuum of change than Horatio's.

Hamlet's perception of honor is neither like his friend Horatio's nor his countryman Laertes'. Rather, Hamlet's use of promise, though certainly problematic and complex, explicitly identifies him as a transitional character in the changing code of honor. In fact, both the medieval chivalric code of honor and the more modern and political and moral code are seemingly embodied in this one character. Moreover, as a transitional character Hamlet must meet the requirements of both codes. It is this attempt to find a balance in a changing code that eventually leads, in part, to Hamlet's tragic death.

According to Shirley, in tragedy, and particularly in both Hamlet and Othello, “oaths are among the most telling signs of changes in attitude in very fully developed characters” (100). A careful examination of Hamlet's use of oaths reveals the change in his attitude towards what is honorable as he struggles to find a code he can use in his tragic situation.

Hamlet begins by swearing to avenge his father's murder. Since his oath is private, it places Hamlet's honor closer to Laertes' in the changing code. Hamlet, however, soon converts to a public form of oath when Horatio becomes confused by Hamlet's words regarding his meeting with the ghost:

HORATIO:

These are but wild and whirling words, my lord.

HAMLET:

I'm sorry they offend you, heartily.

Yes, faith, heartily.

HORATIO:

There's no offens
HAMLET:

Yes by Saint Patrick but there is Horatio,

And much offense too.

(1.5.137-41)

Hamlet, burdened with the revenge of his father's murder, attempts to use the violent, medieval code of honor as he begins to make public oaths. He swears by Saint Patrick, and although his words are confusing to Horatio (and thus Hamlet is not yet publicly committed to action) it is clear to the reader that it is the ghost's words that Hamlet finds offensive, and that he realizes that he must avenge his father.

Hamlet does not swear another oath until act 2: in this oath Hamlet swears by his faith, a faith which must have been considerably shaken by the appearance of his mighty and virtuous father, who should have been resting in peace, but who must decline to tell his tale of purgatory whose lightest word

Would harrow up the soul, freeze the young blood,
Make the two eyes like stars start from their sphere,
Thy knotted and combined locks to part
And each particular hair to stand on end
Like quills upon the fretful porpentine.

(1.5.15-20)

Hamlet hears that the late king, by all accounts an honorable man in the medieval sense of the word, has been sentenced to a “prison” in which he must burn until his sins are purged away. Yet, Hamlet chooses to swear in terms of Christian images; he tells Rosencrantz and Guildenstern that “by my fay I cannot reason” (2.2.251), and later swears by “Sblood” (2.2.336, 3.2.334), “God's bodkin” (2.2.485), “swounds” (2.2.528, 5.1.240), and “i'faith” (3.2.82). Although Hamlet's initial oath swears revenge based upon lineage and familial loyalty, a violent act, he still maintains the moral and Christian image demanded by a more modern view of honor by invoking Christ to bear witness to his oaths.

The complexity of Hamlet's dilemma, of his attempt to satisfy all the demands of a changing honor code, is informed by what Weimann terms “the humanist search for possible areas of interaction between the verbal and the political.” Put simply, Renaissance men could no longer claim to be honorable by asserting the chivalric emphasis on violence and lineage as the authoritative account of what it is to be honorable. This shifting basis prompted some “stimulating dramatic interrogations and revisions” (110), and Shakespeare's text illustrated that the authorization of honor was one of the things being interrogated and revised. Interrogation and revision, in turn, led to what Weimann identifies as a “new fiction” (105) in which “early modern drama and prose narrative were bound to assume a more volatile and divisive space for authorization. In assimilating some heterogeneous and divisive material, the new fiction sought to explore areas of friction and conflict among competing sites of authority” (110). In Hamlet Shakespeare introduces tension or “friction and conflict” among the various and “competing” ways in which honor is authorized. The complexity of Hamlet's situation imposes upon him the need to find an adequate system of honor with which to resolve his dilemma; Hamlet's attempt to carve out a place of honor for himself leads to a crisis of conscience.

Hamlet is the only son of a murdered king. As such he, in medieval terms, is honor-bound to avenge his father's death. But, the murderer is the new king. Hamlet is thus confronted with the taboos of Christian hierarchical order—to exact revenge he must slay a king who is, of course, God's anointed ruler. Moreover, he cannot be completely sure of his countryman's support as Claudius is an elected king. Further, Claudius is accepted by the people who have “freely gone” (1.2.15) along with Claudius's hasty marriage to the king's
widow, and who give “twenty, forty, and hundred ducats apiece for his picture in little” (2.2.366-67). Perhaps more importantly, Hamlet’s anguish of indecision over whether or not to kill Claudius, particularly after the evidence offered by Claudius’s reaction to the “Mousetrap,”14 reflects a changing code of honor in which “the community of honor came to be that which centered on the crown, its structure that of the court and city, its service that of the state, and its mark the nobility of virtue, and the dignities which this conferred.”15 Hamlet hesitates to kill Claudius throughout the play. While several factors contribute to this delay, it is significant to note that Hamlet exacts revenge for his father’s murder only after Claudius’s treachery has been publicly revealed by both Gertrude and Laertes. Hamlet's original oath of vengeance is fulfilled, but in such a way as to allow him to remain honorable in a new code that requires not only honor, but also acknowledgment of the political hierarchy and morality as well. Hamlet, then, stands as a transitional character who has, on the one hand, the medieval code of honor which requires him to kill a king to avenge his father's murder and, on the other hand, a new code of honor that requires both absolute obedience to the state and adherence to moral virtue. It is in meeting these codes that Hamlet is identified as both a transitional character and a tragic hero.

While it is true that Claudius does not utter a single oath throughout the play, “the cynical manipulation of oaths by a character … is a gauge of his deficient humanity.”16 Claudius stands as the epitome of the way in which a system of honor that is entirely politicized can be perverted. His Machiavellian view of monarchy is apparent in the way he manipulates those around him into promises that suit only his purpose. Hence, he plays on the honor of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern when he requests that they spy on Hamlet for him. Rosencrantz responds to this request with words that express his understanding of the politics of honor:

Both your majesties
Might by the sovereign power you have of us
Put your dread pleasure more into command
Than to entreaty.

(2.2.26-29)

This courtier understands that within the new code being honorable means acting in complete obedience to the state. Guildenstern, likewise, pledges his loyalty to the sovereigns:

But we both obey,
and here give up ourselves in full bent
To lay our service freely at your feet
To be commanded.

(2.2.30-33)

Although Gertrude assures the courtiers that they will be rewarded for their obedience (2.2.24- 25), and notwithstanding the use of language that has Rosencrantz and Guildenstern offer their loyalty to the persons of the king and queen, Shakespeare makes it clear that these men are not mere court dandies attempting to curry favor with the monarchy:

HAMLET:

O God, I could be bounded in a nutshell, and count myself king of infinite space, were it not that I have bad dreams.

GUILDENSTERN:

Which dreams are indeed ambition, for the very substance of the ambitious is merely a shadow of a

HAMLET:
A dream itself is but a shadow.

ROSENCRANTZ:

Truly, and I hold ambition of so airy and light a quality that it is but a shadow's shadow.

(2.2.243-49)

Ambition is clearly not Guildenstern's and Rosencrantz's motivation. While it is true that these two courtiers may simply be spouting court rhetoric in this passage, it is significant to note that Hamlet himself speaks for their honesty when he remarks that they have "a kind of confession in their looks which your modesties have not craft enough to colour" (2.2.281-82). Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are not good liars; they lack the "craft" to cover their deception. Rather, Claudius is able to manipulate both their loyalty to the state and their loyalty to their childhood friend to gain their cooperation in his attempt to spy on Hamlet.

Similarly, Claudius manipulates Polonius's sense of honor in an attempt to garner aid in dealing with Hamlet. Polonius's speeches are replete with oaths; he prefaces many of his comments with an invocation to God or heaven. Claudius, a skilled politician, uses Polonius's need to appear honorable to the public to enlist his services. Thus, when Polonius reveals the love letter Hamlet wrote to Ophelia, Polonius questions the king: "What do you think of me?" (2.2.127). Claudius, knowing that Polonius is attempting to appear honorable, replies: "As a man faithful and honourable" (2.2.128); Polonius gains honor through the questionable means of betraying both Hamlet and Ophelia but, in his mind, doing what is best for the state by helping to determine the cause of the prince's "madness."

Finally, Claudius overtly appeals to Laertes' sense of chivalric honor as the king manipulates Laertes into killing Hamlet. Laertes reacts with hotheaded violence upon discovering that Hamlet is responsible for Polonius's death. Claudius, however, uses Laertes' chivalric sense of honor in much the same way as he used Polonius's more modern concept. Claudius, attempting to use Laertes to rid the kingdom of Hamlet, appeals to the chivalric honor code that rests upon loyalty to kin: "Laertes, was your father dear to you? / Or are you like the painting of sorrow, / A face without a heart?" (4.7.106-8). Although Claudius seems to have no honor system of his own, he is aware of the various forms that honor takes in a changing world and skillfully uses them to accomplish his purposes.

Shakespeare creates characters in Hamlet that represent various stages in the evolution of a changing system of honor. Horatio, Laertes, and Hamlet all indicate, by their use of promise, different concepts of honor that range from an antique system of kinship and violence to a more modern idea of Christian morality, virtue, and allegiance to the state. Claudius, who makes no promises, illustrates the way in which systems of honor can be used, and perverted, in the political arena. Moreover, Shakespeare delineates these characters, their concepts of honor, and their functions in moving the dramatic action toward its climax by a careful use of each character's "freely given word." In doing so, Shakespeare also takes a conventional stance in a period of change. Horatio, the character most representative of an old system of honor, is portrayed as worthy, honest, and likable. On the other end of the scale stands Claudius, a man who is seemingly without honor but who is capable of manipulating the honor code in the most heinous ways. Between these two extremes lies Hamlet himself. Hamlet represents a middle point in the changing honor system, and it is his attempt to gain an antique honor in a new system that contributes not only to his own tragic death, but to the deaths of several others as well. One must not forget that if Hamlet had taken revenge immediately, as required by the medieval code of honor, Rosencrantz, Guildenstern, Ophelia, Gertrude, Polonius, Laertes, and perhaps even Hamlet himself would have survived the events of the drama. Instead, Hamlet is caught in a changing system of honor, and it is his effort to incorporate these changes which leads, in part, to the deaths of many characters. Hamlet's difficulty in meeting the requirements of two disparate honor codes further leads to the delay that allows Claudius to become a politicized manipulator of promise, leaving one to wonder whom Laertes is
addressing when he angrily exclaims “Vows to the blackest devil” (4.5.129).

Notes

1. One of the best examples of this renewed interest can be found in Transactions of the Royal Historical Society, 6th series, which contains several articles on Renaissance honor and includes Cynthia Herrup's excellent examination of the legal aspects of honor, manifest in Renaissance slander cases.

2. Of the three most recent studies of Hamlet—Kerrigan's Hamlet's Perfection, States's Hamlet and the Concept of Character, and Foakes's Hamlet Versus Lear: Cultural Politics in Shakespeare's Art—only Foakes discusses the Renaissance concepts of honor apparent in this play, and none considers the importance of the use of promise in this tragedy. Foakes's discussion, however, is couched in terms of Hamlet's association of his father and a heroic ideal of martial honor. Foakes argues that Hamlet distances himself from this ideal through the use of pre-Christian classical images to describe his father, thus both separating himself from this heroic ideal and aligning himself more closely with a Christian stoic concept of patient suffering. Foakes concludes that the play demonstrates the horrible nature of both revenge and military rule; he therefore overlooks the more positive aspects of the residual medieval honor code that can be found in the play.

3. States, in his important study Hamlet and the Concept of Character, persuasively argues that at the center of Hamlet lies a complex relationship between the world of value and the characters of the play. He links these values to both political and moral concerns in the Renaissance, but he describes this world as a set of binary opposites—sanguine vs. melancholy, reason vs. madness, etc.—which does not address the interplaying and overlapping context of Renaissance values, including honor codes.

4. Cust, 91, identifies these three aspects of honor in a slightly different way. He postulates that there were two opposed concepts of honor, that is, blood and lineage vs. godliness and wisdom, and that loyalty to the monarch, service to the commonwealth, and obedience to the law overlapped both of these opposed ideas of what constitutes an honorable man.

5. The Short Title Catalogue contains many examples of this courtesy literature indicating that how-to books were both common and popular in this period, Barnaby Rich's Roome for a Gentleman, Richard Braithwaite's The English Gentleman, William Perkins's How to Live, and an anonymous tract entitled Instruction of a Gentleman, for example.

6. For more on the Renaissance concept of conscience, and particularly on the way in which women's consciences were perceived by contemporaries, see Lowell Gallagher, Medusa's Gaze: Casuistry and Conscience in the Renaissance.

7. Keen, 43. Keen later points out that the rituals and ceremonies of knighthood were not officiated by the clergy, nor did they take place within the church. Moreover, Keen illustrates that the virtues that the medieval knight was attempting to gain were primarily still violent; the medieval honor code encompassed the knightly promise to protect the weak with the might of the sword.

8. For the importance of the conscience in Renaissance religious and political matters, see Camille Wells Slichts, who points out that casuistry was a phenomenon in this period which arose in response to a crisis of both conscience and authority in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. According to Slichts, the prevalence of this branch of theology was an attempt to aid contemporaries in reconciling religious faith with the demands of particular human situations that may create a crisis of the individual conscience. As early as 1957 Barber pointed out that there existed the “beginnings of a tendency for honor to mean an inner conscience rather than external reward” (103) in the drama of this period. Weimann concurs when he argues that “in late Elizabethan Puritan circles Puritan divines began to promulgate the elevation of human conscience over law” (88). Thomas relates this Elizabethan emphasis on the individual conscience to the use of promise when he writes that “the Protestant emphasis upon the individual conscience inevitably shifted the ultimate sanction for truthfulness from the external fear of divine punishment to the godly man's internal sense of
responsibility. A man should keep his word simply because he had given it” (76-77).

9. While Kerrigan does not specifically discuss honor, he does argue that Hamlet learns, particularly in the graveyard scene, that revenge (an important component of the honor code) need not be bloody and violent because the decay and deterioration of the body after death is itself more horrible than any human vengeance. Kerrigan concludes that in this play Christianity and revenge become compatible. The Renaissance was, however, marked by intense debate about what it was to be noble and honorable as well as the ferocious controversy regarding one's right to duel and / or commit violent revenge.

10. James, 339. James further notes that “consistency in standing by a position once taken was basic to the honor code. But since the latter [code] was a public one, that of a society of honorable men, there was a need to define the position to which honor was committed as a public gesture. This took the form of promise and oath, the giving of one's word, the ‘word of honour.’ Once this had been done the man of honour could withdraw only at the expense of the diminishment involved in dishonour” (339).


12. Bristol argues that Fortinbras's actions—his preparations to make war against Denmark—are representative of a gift culture in which the gift of Old Fortinbras's life must be repaid. This code, which Bristol calls the “law of reciprocity,” requires that gifts be repaid, that grievances be redressed, and that social continuity be maintained. According to Bristol, the law of reciprocity cannot be reproduced in Hamlet since there is no one, at the end of the play, to reciprocate or retaliate on Hamlet's behalf. Hamlet is the last of his line. Although Bristol's argument does not focus on honor specifically, implicit in his study is the medieval or feudal idea of comitatus that we see in Beowulf. But, extrapolating from Bristol, this medieval code gives way to a more modern one when the complexity of reciprocity is ironed out at the end of the play. Hamlet has avenged his father; Fortinbras and Laertes have done the same, and these three childless men have broken the cycle, for all the violent deaths—beginning with Old Fortinbras and ending with Hamlet—have been repaid.

13. According to Weimann, the basis of authority came into question when “the traditional repertoire of signs and symbols offered by popular lore or the romance of chivalry … could no longer be counted on as fixed, valid, or satisfying” (110).

14. In his introduction to Hamlet in The Norton Shakespeare, Stephen Greenblatt offers various other reasons for Claudius's reaction to The Mousetrap. I would argue, however, that Hamlet himself does not consider these alternatives, and that the prince believes that Claudius's panic is concrete proof of his guilt.

15. James, 381.


Bibliography


Criticism: Themes: Tzachi Zamir (essay date September 2002)


In the following essay, Zamir contends that Prince Hamlet's failure to avenge his father's death is the result of his fear of revealing his own individuality.

Some still-influential theories of meaning in philosophy have regarded the literary treatment of a philosophical concept to be informatively redundant (Ayer; Curtler; Stevenson). Such conceptions have important counterparts in Formalist aesthetics (e.g., Richards; Brooks) and are continuous with a long historical tradition both in the history of philosophy (Nussbaum, *Love's* 10-23) and in the history of rhetoric (Perelman).

The case against the knowledge-yielding capacities of literature comes in both a strong and a weak version. According to the strong version, informative discourse is exhausted by what may be termed “theoretical language”: “literal” (at least ideally) truth claims and argumentation. Philosophy is a “cognitive discipline,” that is, it is an activity that seeks to gain information concerning its subject matter, and so literary texts are irrelevant as far as philosophical concerns go. The weaker version assumes that the term informative should cover a broader range. Non-theoretical discourse, such as figurative language, may well be informative, and, therefore, media like literature, which employ such means, can address philosophical issues. Nevertheless, whatever is relevant to philosophy in these texts can be paraphrased in theoretical language with no loss of meaning, at least not meaning that is of any significance to philosophy.

Arguing against the stronger version is relatively easy. Accepting the emotive/cognitive distinction, one can begin by arguing that literary texts are in part cognitive since literary works do include literal truth claims and that non-literal uses of language may well be seen as informative (e.g., Lakoff and Turner). One could go on to unsettle the emotive/cognitive distinction itself (Nussbaum, *Love's* 40-43; “Emotions”). Finally, one could invoke arguments that have been used to unsettle the literal/figurative opposition underlying the stronger thesis (De Man; Derrida 207-72; Rorty ch. 2). Confronting the weaker thesis is, however, a different matter.
None of the arguments that may be used against the stronger version is applicable since no commitment is being made to the emotive/cognitive or literal/figurative distinctions. The holder of the weak view is merely committed to adequate translatable into theoretical language of whatever is regarded as the knowledge accessed by the literary elements. One may attempt to attack the literary/theoretic distinction, or the very distinction between philosophy and literature, distinctions to which the defender of the weaker view is certainly committed. However, such a deconstruction is too costly for those who find a philosophical relevance for literature since an all-embracing textuality undermines the entire attempt to work out a theoretical framework for the investigation of the links between philosophy and literature.

Rejecting the weak position involves arguing for the irreducibility of certain modes of presentation to theoretical language (Iser 76-77; Nussbaum, Love's 7). The first way to do this is by arguing for the existence of faculties of knowing that cannot be accessed by theoretical language and are, yet, modes of understanding. I have elsewhere argued that such connections between implicit epistemology and non-systematic presentation are operative in the writings of Plato and Nietzsche (Zamir, “Seeing”; “Face”). The second way is to invoke a distinction between conceptual information and the experience of such information. It would thus be possible to identify the irreducible kind of knowing that literature provides, with the unique experience of conceptual information that it enables. Experiences always retain a non-paraphrasable component of information that can be gained only by actually going through them. Moreover, since such experiences are themselves unique kinds of understanding, such patterns of experience become themselves a proper object of philosophical inquiry.

While several investigations into the philosophy-literature relations have ultimately located literature's irreducible gains in terms of cognitive experiences (Duska; Kalin; Kuhns; Nussbaum, Love's; Palmer), such results have to be further analyzed into particularized contexts in which a specific claim having a well-defined logical status is related to an experiential pattern. I have elsewhere attempted this task regarding first truths and contingent claims in two of Shakespeare's tragedies (Zamir, Upon”; “Mature”). My reading of Hamlet here attempts this in relation to undisclosable aspects of the “self.”

Hamlet plays many games with ears, hearing, and audibility. Norman Holland claims that the word ear occurs twenty-five times in Hamlet, which is more than in any other of Shakespeare's works. Mary Anderson counts at least 184 references to eyes, ears, seeing, and hearing in the first two acts. Ears differ from eyes—the other faculty heavily alluded to in the play—in their constitution as a bodily entrance. Unlike other sense organs, the ear promises almost limitless exploration of interiority (recall Freud's remark that the ear is an organ that the infant cannot close). Such a metaphorical identification of the ear as a gate into the body is made explicit not only in the allusion to Horatio's “fortified” ears but also in the story of the ghost. The poison poured through “the porches” of the ear that like quicksilver “courses through the natural gates and alleys of the body” (1.5.66-67) equates the corporeal with something like a town, the entrance to which is through the ear. Shakespeare's employment of audial imagery in this way is continuous with some Renaissance anatomical and physiological conceptions of hearing as a process that involves penetration of the body. Such preoccupation is exemplified in anatomical and musicological treatises that repeatedly invoke architectural imagery that invites exploration through specific allusions to penetration.

Before turning to the significance of this imagery, we need to note the associative clusters involving penetration and possession that the invocation of acoustic imagery would set in motion in Shakespeare's contemporaries. Mondino dei Lucci wrote of “the cavity” or “the twisted cavity” in which is “implanted the auditory spirit” that is to be found in “every ear” (qtd. in Crombie 385, emph. mine). Volcher Coiter's description of the process of hearing describes “the passage” of sound as “carried through the twisting and turning windings of the ears” (qtd. in Crombie 386, emph. mine). The allusion to winding paths appears earlier in Avicenna in his Canon Medicinae (Liber 4, Fen 3, Cap 1 “De Anatomia Aoris”), and another early writer, Albertus Magnus, conceived (in his Opera Omnia, xxxv, “Summa de Creaturis”) of the “cavity” as a “resonating chamber” (qtd. in Burnett et al. 60, emph. mine). Helkiah Crooke's Microcosmographia refers to
sound as carried “through the windowes of the stony bone […] into the winding burroughs, and so into the
labyrinth” (qtd. in Gouk 100). Thomas Willis's *De anima brutorum* is even more explicitly eucological in his
imagery (see Crombie 392-93). He adds to the fenestre ovalis an entire discourse embellished with
architectural imagery. He talks of doors, caverns, passages, arched meanders, chambers, and dens. He even
refers explicitly to architects who could copy the design.

Apart from audal infiltration, suggested by an anatomical discourse that invites exploration of internal
cavities, chambers, and paths, whatever enters the ears is for the most part conceived as a powerful (if not
violent) entity that is capable of transforming the hearer. This theme is connected in Renaissance anatomy and
musicology (as well as in some of its earlier influences) to the recurrence of the persistent,
counter-ocularcentric theme of the superiority of hearing to sight (Febvre 432-37; Tomlinson 134-44). J. C.
Scaliger claimed that “we learn things through the hearing more easily than through the sight, because the
voice affects us more by inflection and insinuating itself into the sense” (qtd. in Gouk 100). Helkiah Crooke
claimed that things that are heard make a deeper impression on the mind (qtd. in Gouk 100). Much earlier,
Boethiuss remarked in his *Fundamentals of Music* (181) that, “indeed, no path to the mind is as open for
instruction as the sense of hearing. Thus, when rhythms and modes reach an intellect through the ears, they
doubtless affect and reshape that mind according to their particular character” (181, emph. mine). This remark
echoes Aristotle, who, while claiming that sight is the superior sense for the primary needs of life, added that
“hearing takes precedence” for “the developing intelligence and its indirect consequences” (*De Sensu* 1.437a).
Invoking an old conceptualization, Francis Bacon alluded to the “similar nature” and “affinity” that “tunes and
aires” have to our “affections” in order to explain why it is “that the sense of hearing striketh the spirits more
immediately than the other senses.” More than any other sense, hearing has a “present and immediate access”
to the spirits. Harmony “entering easily,” has the power to “alter the spirits in themselves” (exp. 114, emph.
mine). Marsilio Ficino's language is even more extreme. This influential authority (see: Walker; Tomlinson
137-44) refers to the audal effect through words and music as “penetrating the depths of the soul” more
strongly than all other senses. Such sound “seizes, and claims as its own, man in his entirety” (Walker 137,
emph. mine).

I now turn to the way through which audal imagery underlies the play's presentation of personal disclosure,
insulation, penetration, and genuine communication, with its presentation of an unmotivated suspension
between resolution and action.

Commentary concerning the question of Hamlet's delay—that is, documented patterns of
reader-response—covers a rich range of actual responses to inaction. Some explanations aim to circumvent
the psychological question by appealing to dramatic considerations, claiming, for example, that through
highlighting inaction, Shakespeare attempts to resist “the structural syntax of revenge tragedy” (Calderwood
28). Note, however, that, when the psychological question is directly confronted as a problem, something is
already said about the reader's own projections. More specifically, the very attempt to explain or supply
excuses for the delay is itself already an endorsing of a tacit identification of subjectivity with agency. The
same projection is also revealed in interpreters not feeling a need to explain other aspects of the play, for
example, Laertes' non-delayed resolution and action. In the two soliloquies of self-reproach, it seems obvious
that Hamlet himself does not know why he hesitates. He even says as much (4.4.43). If we respect this
answer, and the fact that the play does not give us a better one, we can regard this epistemic limitation not as a
puzzle to be “solved” but rather as the designated position to which the rhetoric of this play moves its
audience. So, instead of trying to solve the problem of Hamlet's delay, let us attempt to perceive what is being
achieved by making delay a problem.

The significance of focussing attention on delay enables highlighting a certain tension between what one may,
for lack of better word, problematically call a “self” (Ferry; Greenblatt 131-45) and performance. *Hamlet*
shifts easily from one to the other in cases of role-playing when it is precisely performance that sets up the gap
between what one is perceived to be and what one is. The magical pull of conscious role-playing relates to the

ability to keep an aspect of the self encapsulated and unperceived. Action through acting offers safety and enables impenetrability. For Hamlet, it permits a response to the seductiveness of remaining uncontacted. However, it is when the role must turn into a large-scale, determining action that Hamlet is disoriented. All the other situations in which he acts are such that the action is either immediately reactive, or situations in which he is perceived and could therefore be judged. In such situations, inaction would be no less determining of what he is considered by others as being. The delayed vengeance is different. Only he knows of it. No one expects him to take revenge. (Horatio, who later in the play learns the truth, is close enough to him to be non-judgemental.) Hamlet allows procrastination to take place only in the private sphere.

The relations between performance and self are first set by the ghost's demand of Hamlet, in which action (revenge) is so naturally supposed to spring from filial love. We also perceive these relations in the Pyrrhus and Priam story that haunts Hamlet. The language of that tale involves most of the deeper structural components contained in the model of an “overtaken” self that the play will later problematize: “control” and wishing for its “loss,” being “overseized,” allowing oneself to be “used” by another (or by a father), and waiting to be “possessed” by passion.

It is not surprising that the simplistic model of self and agency employed by both the ghost and the actor reciting the Trojan tale (which Hamlet commends for so easily responding to the “cue” for passion) cannot really work for Hamlet. Hamlet's preoccupation with the tension between appearance and reality undermines the possibility of his believing that performance can be non-problematically indicative of self. After all, Hamlet believes in an internal unactable truth, in having “that within which passes show” (1.2.85) and in this he probably goes beyond other sixteenth-century conceptualizations of the seeming/being gap that centre only on the possibilities of dissembling and not on the more radical ones of non-disclosure (Ferry 212-14). The metaphor of inwardness demarcates an essence that Hamlet divorces from the sphere of action. This he sets in opposition to Claudius's conception of grief as being reducible to performance (1.2.87-101). Such awareness of an inwardness that cannot be acted out also opposes the action-centred subjectivity that Hamlet continually encounters in Fortinbras and Laertes, the other two sons with whom he repeatedly compares himself.

We should not, however, merely conclude that Hamlet's internal logic rejects equating the totality of what he is with an agent, but that he is also strongly drawn to this possibility. Perhaps it is the promise of certainty, the illusion of knowing through performance what one really is, what one truly feels, that charms Hamlet into recurring blindness. Hamlet is a man fluctuating between competing self-descriptions in an all-embracing vagueness. When no other way can stabilize a self-description when it is placed in doubt, performance becomes the route that promises verification. And yet, Hamlet's painful awareness of the gap between what is seen and what is, prevents him from maintaining this illusion for long (cf. Cavell).

To avoid actions that exhaustively determine what one becomes is to resist equating the self with an agent. Acting or, more specifically, a move from resolution to action is how such identification is established. Such identification is what Hamlet encounters in those around him, and it is what he wishes for himself. However, inexplicable, mysterious non-action permits the gap between the disclosable and the encapsulated to come into (or more accurately remain in) existence. The refusal to be disclosed stems from a vague awareness of the existence of “that within which passes show,” of a part in one's being, a “mystery” that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern seek to “pluck out” (3.2.356). Hamlet's dying wish to “report me and my cause aright / To the unsatisfied” (5.2.344-45) exposes his own sense of his separateness from others, which is not merely his own subjective perspective, as all other characters interpret him falsely. No one knows the cause of his melancholy, if it is melancholy, and all the reasons they give for it—unsatisfied love for Ophelia (Polonius), his mother's hasty marriage (Gertrude), unfulfilled ambition (Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and perhaps suspected by Claudius)—are partial at best.

However, while replacing wrong or incomplete descriptions of Hamlet with a correct one that Horatio is meant to posthumously produce can repair this estrangement, Hamlet's encapsulation seems to go much
deeper. For Hamlet (and for Hamlet), disclosure is avoided not only by engaging in pretense or by deferring action but also more radically by altogether dismissing language. Recall that Hamlet's dying words are a request that his story be only “more and less” (5.2.362) related to Fortinbras. As for the rest—“the rest is silence” (5.2.363). What is not included in the necessarily vague description of events that Hamlet's “more and less” prescribes must remain outside discourse. Such disbelief in linguistic disclosure is evident in Hamlet throughout, since it is precisely revealing himself through language, through words and more words, which he not only shuns but violently despises (2.2.578-82). Turning from Hamlet to Hamlet, we may observe not only the silence involved in the emplotted mystery but also that the very last moment in the play—the gunshot—is meaningful sound, which is supposed to “Speak loudly” (5.2.405) for Hamlet, according to Fortinbras, “but is yet a speaking,” which is crude sound and not elaborate language. By ending through non-discursive sound, the play, like Hamlet's last words, closes by moving outside linguistic expression.

Apart from pointing to Hamlet's hostility to the attempt to “pluck out” the heart of his mystery, the play articulates some of the subtleties of awareness of the limitations of contact that are involved in such a self-conceptualization. Hamlet's need to remain undisclosed is paradoxically—though perhaps typically of such drives—linked with an opposite desire to be internalized and perceived. It is in this light that we can read Hamlet's second line in the play. To the ironical sun/son ambivalence usually read into Hamlet's self-allusion of being “too much in the sun” (1.2.67), we may add that not only does being in the light of the sun symbolize knowing the truth but also that Hamlet's first words metaphorically position him in the most perceptible of locations. He wants to be seen. We may now see how the focus on corporeal penetration through the audal invoked by Shakespeare's use of acoustic imagery meets the self/performance encapsulation/disclosure dualities. Of all the characters in the play, Hamlet is the only one who uses the questioning idiom of “Do you hear?” during conversation (see: 2.2.519; 2.2.531; 3.2.62; 5.1.283). The preoccupation with success at achieving specifically audal contact implies both a fear of seclusion and a desire to be internalized through sound. However, what could have seemed to be an anticipation of Hegel's phenomenology of sound—sound as exposing one's “inner life”—cannot be the end of things for Hamlet. His disrespect for language and the distrust of linguistic expression turns acoustics into no more than an approximation. Contact remains a fantasy, and the heart of his mystery must remain silenced. But, although an aspect of Hamlet's self cannot be contacted, he still tries to reach and affect another's. This is conveyed by another aspect of audal imagery: the preoccupation with violence done to ears.

Hamlet considers ill-spoken words concerning Horatio to be “violence” done to his ear and asks Horatio not to use such words (1.2.170-71). He is jealous of the player who could “cleave the general ear” with horrid speech (2.2.557), and it offends him to hear a player “split the ear” of the groundlings who are capable of nothing (3.2.10-11). Criticizing Laertes's exaggerated bemoaning of Ophelia, Hamlet echoes the arresting of motion by sound in the Pyrrhus and Priam story, and asks “whose phrase of sorrow / Conjures the wand'ring stars and makes them stand / Like wonder-wounded hearers?” (5.1.248-50). It is violence to his mother's ears that he sets out to perform by “speaking daggers to her ears,” an achievement that is confirmed by Gertrude almost word for word (3.4.95).

There are connections between these metaphorical appeals to acoustical injury, and the violent ways in which the various Renaissance tracts surveyed earlier portray the transformation of the mental through sound (“inflecting,” “reshaping,” “striking,” “altering,” “insinuating,” “seizing,” “claiming as its own”). Beside these links, Hamlet's obsession with the theme of verbal violence done to the ear (cleaving, splitting, stabbing, wounding) opposes perverse and non-perverse modes of penetration. From the moment that the psychic effects of language are metaphorically and synecdochically referred to through constructions that literally designate physical disruption done to the organs of sound, the seemingly safe, naturally allowed entrance of language through the ear gains sinister overtones. The tropical violence done to ears signifies disrupting change that centres not only on the personality in general but also on the specific aspects of it that permit receptivity. Speaking daggers in Gertrude's ear, metaphorical destruction of acoustical entrance, parallels Hamlet's request of his mother, in the same speech, to avoid the corporeal receptivity involved in sexual
The wish to alter the other through the audal, along with the anxiety of separation revealed in the fear of not being heard, exposes ears as that through which a manifestation-transcending aspect of self paradoxically hopes to “appear.” However, for Hamlet, mere entrance is not enough. Hamlet seeks not only to penetrate Gertrude, the only character in the play that he does reach through audal infiltration, but also to metaphorically violate with acoustical daggers that through which he enters. To the many psychoanalytic readings of Hamlet’s relations to his mother from Jones to Adelman, we may add that this is an inversion of the desire to enter a virgin: a wish to be the last.

Hamlet’s talk with his mother—the most passionate moments in the play—is where all the themes I treat here join. The self-knowledge that Hamlet intends Gertrude to reach is assimilated with self-penetration, and this is done specifically through the senses. Let us set aside some of the connections between inwardness, penetration, and the female body that may be perceived in the scene (Maus 193). The conceptualization of the self in conflict as that in which one part seeks access to the other is the outcome of setting up a mirror to Gertrude, by exposing her to the outpouring of audal daggers that ultimately yield self-knowledge (cf. Hillman). Unlike Claudius, for whom reflective art—The Mousetrap—was sufficient for the purposes of active self-judgement, Gertrude’s language consistently casts self-knowledge as the outcome of her being brought to that state by Hamlet. He is the one who turns her eyes inward. He is the one who “cleaves her heart in twain.” However, Hamlet turns Gertrude’s process of self-knowledge into a co-operative rather than a passive enterprise. She is brought to a state of participation in what ends in the breaking of her heart.

The breaking of the heart via audal daggers is consistent with Aristotle’s influential theory of perception. Sound, according to Aristotle’s On the Parts of Animals, literally enters through the ear, is conveyed by the blood, and is heard in the heart, the organ responsible for all conscious sense perception (656a; 656b; 666). Several Renaissance authorities followed this conception. T. Wright acknowledges it as a possible account of hearing, though he did not accept it: “The third manner […] is this, that the very sound it seeselfe […] which passeth thorow the eared and by them unto the heart, and there beateth and tickleth it in such sort, as it is moved with semblable passion.” Scaliger located sense perception in the heart since the spirits around the heart are supposed to take in the trembling motion of music and are stirred up. Helkiah Crooke followed up this account (Gouk 100-02).

The heart is posited as the target for audal penetration at the beginning of the scene (hoping that it would not be “proof and bulwark against sense” [3.4.38]). The use of language that challenges again and again the adequacy of Gertrude’s senses (3.4.72-81), while at the same time itself piercing through the alleys and cavities of a sense, brings together the themes of acoustics and penetration with that of touch. Contact is anticipated by the grabbing of her arm (or by whatever action it is by which he forcefully prevents her from leaving). It is also anticipated by his references to her moving from detached naming (“You are the queen, your husband's brother's wife / And would it were not so, you are my mother” [3.4.14-15]) to the ironical (“good mother,” “lady” [27, 30]) to the intimately passionate (“Mother” [146]) employed but twelve lines before the breaking of her heart.

The climactic cleaving of the heart—that is, contact—is the precise point where Hamlet moves to a demand for specific performance from Gertrude and to explicitly re-address her with the relations between performing and self. He asks Gertrude to refrain from sexual liaison with Claudius: “For use,” he tells her, “almost can change the stamp of nature” (3.4.170). That is to say, acting in the proposed way could come close (only close) to changing what she is.

The fact that the problematic relations between performance and self are brought up in the context in which the figurative play with the senses is at its most intense point in the play joins two concerns of this work into one. It is after the breaking up of the senses into their parts in Hamlet’s speech that Gertrude is seen to be not
only metaphorically blind but also literally blind to the re-appearance of the ghost. Ironically, it is she, who thinks that “all that is I see” (3.4.133), who continually mistakes appearances for reality, that turns out to be the one person who does not see what Hamlet, as well as the audience and previous characters, have all seen. This blindness is even more noteworthy since she is repeatedly alluded to in the play through references to her sight. Claudius, who incidentally is compared in this scene to “a mildew'd ear,” always refers to Gertrude through notions of sight and never through those of sound (3.1.32, 5.1.291, 5.1.293, 5.2.314). The significance of this should not be overlooked, since Claudius is meticulous in his distribution of words about the senses. To Laertes, he always uses metaphors of sound and never sight (4.5.94, 4.5.202, 4.7.3, 4.7.33, 4.7.40).

It is after the discovery of Gertrude's blindness that Hamlet demands specific performance from her. No longer occupied with his own insulation, he still senses a part of her that resists his moralizing (3.4.146-157). And so he would mold her into bearable (for him) action rather than cope with that which passes show in her. It is thus that both of them resist maintaining the fleeting moment of contact. To Hamlet's distinction between “use” and “nature” (performance/self), Gertrude's response is “What shall I do?” (3.4.183). Rather than look upon the black spots in her soul, her own “that within,” she wants and can understand action (“What wilt thou do?” [20], “O me, what hast thou done?” [24], “What have I done, that thou dar'st wag thy tongue / In noise so rude against me?” [38-39], “What act / That roars so loud and thunders in the index?” [51-52]). But it is her final words in the scene, her exaggerated metaphorical reference to being killed by Hamlet's words (“if words be made of breath, and breath of life, I have no life to breathe what thou hast said to me” [199-201]), that imply a change. What begins by this numb queen's complaining of Hamlet's accusation as being audial overexposure—of the “noise” he makes (39) or by asking what act it is that he blames her with that “roars so loud in the index” (52)—ends with metaphorical non-being, with a retreat from the desire to maintain a self-conceptualization after what Hamlet has said. She realizes that, now, nothing can be done. And placing her in a position in which she can be rather than do—moan, rather than transform grief into action that makes up a life that supposedly must go on—is Hamlet's small victory.

The more abstract concerns that underlie the play are that self-exposure and communication require an assent to partiality. We become an object of reference through being reduced to our manifestation as performing agents. Trying to remain undisclosed, doing nothing, is the attempt to resist this reduction. Hamlet is a play about such an attempt. The reasons underlying the resistance escape the person involved and, the play suggests, must escape him because of what he takes to be the essential defects of language. Words reduce the self to a collection of descriptions that supposedly capture and stabilize what one is, thereby enabling reference, signification, and evaluation.

In terms of the philosophy-literature links, if Shakespeare was in fact a “philosopher” interested in communicating through systematic presentation some of the broader aspects that might support an alleged resistance to being disclosed, there is a point at which he would have necessarily failed. The descriptive language of systematic presentation—conceptual truth-claims and argumentation—can refer to passing-show aspects only through referring to them negatively (think of the via negativa tradition in theological contexts). But it is when one tries to say what a non-disclosed aspect of self is, as opposed to asserting what it is not, that one is reduced either to silence or to the language of approximations (both options, as we have seen, are employed in this play). It is at this point that we can easily fall into the usual philosophical violence of eliminating what we are unable to reduce to our modes of description.

One could ask about the truth of such a model, whether there really are undisclosable parts of self. But with reference to the links between philosophy and literature, I think what is important is not so much this (whether there really are undisclosable parts of self), but rather what is involved in attempting to communicate a belief in such a model. We should recognize that as far as such communicating goes, there is a point at which a certain model of self may only be sensed. “Sensing” is, of course, a slippery notion. Attempting to say what is sensed through a systematic discourse seems to necessitate dropping the claim for its alleged ineffability in relation to that discourse. There are, however, avenues through which one may become strongly aware of
alternatives without being directly told what they are. The literary work's ability to construct a cognitive experience is such a route. By compelling readers to project their predisposed conceptions of subjectivity and agency, literary works enable us to read not only “the work” narrowly conceived but also the conceptual structures and the emotional dispositions that determine our own thinking. The distance achieved by such repositioning allows for freedom in “sensing” alternative schemes, ones that can never be fully brought to the surface and must remain opaque.

I have been arguing that what *Hamlet* reflects—and a play's purpose, Hamlet says, is always to reflect (3.2.20-25)—to those who recognize in it a problem of delay is an embodiment of a part of the self that has nothing to do with agency. This is how delay is not explained away but, rather, explained as such. By creating an experience that complicates the move from resolution to action, the play sets in motion a fascinating parallelism between the fictional occurrences that it depicts and real response. Hamlet explicitly commits himself to the idea of not merely a secretive but of an ineffable, passing-show aspect of subjectivity in the first lines he utters. And the existence of such an aspect is the possibility that the audience is invited to contemplate through their own experience of the play.

While several writers on the relations between literature and philosophy have invoked the idea of reader experience, Hamlet enables replacing this too-general construction with a specific pattern. In *Hamlet*, such a pattern involves a particular projection that is being manipulated in a subtle way. More specifically, since a repeated response to this play is the attempt to remotivate Hamlet's procrastination instead of seeing unjustified inaction as the aspect to be explained, we can isolate a play/audience relationship that frustrates certain explanatory dispositions. The existence of an inexpressible drive that blunts Hamlet's purpose, the fact that nothing in Hamlet or in *Hamlet* sufficiently explains it, means that this play cannot be penetrated through identifying the self with an agent. Positioning the audience or the reader in such an aporetic stance lets them experience the breakdown of a self-conception. This led Thomas Hanmer and T. S. Eliot to find an aesthetic fault in the play. More fruitfully, one could see here the reduction to impotence of a basic conceptualization that, like Gertrude, we readily (if not automatically) employ.

Looking back to the chain of explanations for delay and their consecutive refutations, one can almost envision Shakespeare purposely planning textual time bombs to explode as soon as the need to disprove an explanation arose. Whether the explanation offered is that Hamlet is overly intellectual, lacks opportunities to kill Claudius, or does not know what he wants, the textual evidence that refute it are all there. He is not a coward. He does not lack opportunity. Even though he is an intellectual, in deep shock, and a doubter, he is not ineffectual. What does seem to unequivocally manifest itself through the terminology of the secondary literature—“the problem of delay,” “the problem of problems,” “mystery”—is that a certain mode of relating to people is brought to collapse through the rhetorical operations of this play.

In this failure, Hamlet's inability to explain himself to himself enables the fictional domain to reflect a real-life response to it. We can now unpack the literature-as-reading-us metaphor through which literature and self-knowledge are often linked, into a detailed claim. Through structuring a response in which one experiences the disappointment of non-penetration, this work positions the reader in a similar cognitive and emotive stance as the one articulated by its leading character in his opening lines. Shakespeare presents Hamlet both as an uncontacted man and as one who understands the limitations of communication. However, this is merely a philosophical position, stemming from an awareness of an unbridgeable gap between some dimensions of self and the possibilities of disclosure. The strength of this work is that the attentive reader is not only told something about the limitations of contact but also made to experience them.

*Works Cited*


**Criticism: Themes: R. A. Foakes (essay date 2002)**


[In the following essay, Foakes argues that Hamlet is not a revenge tragedy but a play about whether or not violence is an acceptable choice in a world caught between the ancient heroic code of retaliation and the Christian commandments that reject it.]
Hamlet has commonly been regarded as a revenge tragedy, its early impact being marked by works that capitalized on its success, like John Marston's *Antonio's Revenge* and the anonymous *Revenger's Tragedy*, possibly written by Thomas Middleton. In the twentieth century, critics from A. C. Bradley, writing in 1904, to the editors of the three editions that appeared in the 1980s, all have had much to say about Hamlet's “task” or “duty” to carry out his revenge. Hamlet could be seen as having to deal with “the predicament, quite simply, of a man in mourning for his father, whose murder he is called on to avenge” (Jenkins 126). Hence a central concern for many critics has been the question of why Hamlet delays or avoids taking his revenge on Claudius. He might be seen as pathologically disabled by his speculative intellect and sensitivity in a world of action, handicapped by weakness of character (Dover Wilson), tainted by a “fatal aestheticism” (Nevo 162), or inhibited by the inescapable condition of man (Mack); in any case, and for whatever reason, he has been regarded as a failure in his “evasion of the task imposed on him” (Dodsworth 297). All such accounts of the play have taken for granted that the play's central concern is the need for Hamlet to carry out the Ghost's demand for revenge, and his inability to act has been related to the condition of “Hamletism,” a condition that seemed to define the disillusion, cynicism, or despair that marked a century in which two world wars were fought, and in which the new-media technologies of the film and television made all too familiar the horrors of Nazi gas chambers, of atomic bombs, and of the resurgence of genocide.

Yet, as John Kerrigan observes, “Hamlet never promises to revenge, only to remember” (126)—that is, to remember the Ghost, and to memorize his “commandment” (1.5.102). On reflection, Hamlet reasonably resists the demand for revenge by a questionable Ghost that appears strangely in armor, and that may come from the hell symbolized by his voice from the “cellarage” under the stage. Hamlet later identifies revenge with the figure of Pyrrhus taking vengeance for the death of Achilles by “mincing” the limbs of Priam—this is the horrid image that appalls Hamlet (2.2.513-14). Indeed, revenge is not the dominant concern in *Hamlet*, as comparison with *The Revenger's Tragedy* shows. This play adapts to new uses one of the property skulls thrown about in the gravedigger scene in *Hamlet* first by displaying it as an emblem of murder and of revenge to come, and then as a means of poisoning the Duke in a kiss. From the opening moment, the action is thus determined by Vindice's cry:

Vengeance, thou murder's quit-rent, and whereby
Thou show'st thyself tenant to Tragedy,
O, keep thy day, hour, minute, I beseech,
For those thou hast determined!

(1.1.39-42)

The play looks ahead to vengeance being “paid” as a requital for murder, not only for the rape and murder of Gloriana by the Duke, but for the rape and Lucretia-like suicide of Antonio's wife, a “religious lady” (1.1.111), by the Duchess's youngest son. Most of the male characters in the play are caught up in a desire for revenge of some kind, since the law, as administered by the Duke, is corrupt, and the first act ends with a group swearing on their swords to revenge the death of Antonio's wife if “Judgment speak all in gold” (1.4.61). Vindice claims a high moral ground in his missionary zeal to “blast this villainous dukedom vexed with sin” (5.2.6), but his long obsession with obtaining revenge contaminates him, so that he is shown taking increasing pleasure in torture and murder. He becomes morally indistinguishable from other revengers in the masque of four revengers followed by “the other masque of intended murderers” in act 5, where all look alike and could substitute for one another. The play closes on a Christian moral pattern in which all of the guilty, including Vindice and his brother Hippolito, meet with retribution finally, so that Antonio is left in charge at the end, and can cry “Just is the law above!” But the action throughout is also self-consciously theatrical, as Vindice contrives plots and stages his own scenarios and plays within the play.

In so doing, Vindice often includes the audience in his denunciations of luxury, wealth, ambition, and lust, so that the unnamed court in the play may reflect the licentiousness and corruption perceived by spectators as
present at the court of James I and in Jacobean London. The opening scene looks ahead to the completion of
revenge, and the action presses forward, stressing the present tense. “Now” is the most frequently occurring
adverb in the play, giving a sense of urgency as well as a sense of immediate relevance to the world of the
audience (McMillin 282-3):

Now ’tis full sea abed over the world;
There’s juggling of all sides. Some that were maids
E’en at sunset are now perhaps i’ th’ toll-book.
This woman in immodest thin apparel
Lets in her friend by water; here’s a dame,
Cunning, nails leather hinges to a door
To avoid proclamation; now cuckold are
A-coining, apace, apace, apace …

(2.2.136-43)

The play thus speaks home to a London audience through images such as that of the woman letting in her
friend by water (the Thames?), and by various forms of direct address. The Italianate setting permits the
audience to associate the depiction of intrigue, lust, and murder with a foreign country, but at the same time to
enjoy the frisson of recognizing satirical relevances to their own city and court. As in Hamlet, the protagonist
is something of a misogynist, for whom women may represent an ideal of virtue, as embodied in his sister,
Castiza (signifying Chastity), but more commonly are seen as a source of corruption, of the wealth and sex
that fascinated people then as now: “were’t not for gold and women, there would be no damnation” (2.1.257).

The opening of this play, which has no ghost, is dominated by the displayed skull of a victim of murder,
whereas in Hamlet, by contrast, the early scenes are dominated by the Ghost, and Yorick's skull, handled by
Hamlet, is seen only in act 5, where it recalls the Ghost in serving as a reminder of the past, a remembrance of
Hamlet's childhood. In The Revenger's Tragedy, most of the characters are engaged in a feverish pursuit of
pleasure, sex and power,

Banquets abroad by torchlight, music, sports,
Bare-headed vassals that had ne'er the fortune
To keep their own hats on, but let horns wear 'em;
"Nine coaches waiting,—hurry, hurry, hurry, hurry!"

(2.1.203-6)

When Vindice broods on his world as he contemplates the skull of Gloriana again in act 3, he questions this
pursuit of luxury and pleasure, seeing the court as absurdist and the people in it as mad:

Surely we are all mad people, and they
Whom we think are, are not …

(3.5.80-81)

He is right to include himself, and yet he speaks as the one rational character who is capable of reflecting on
the conduct of others, and who is therefore able to manipulate them and control events. In Shakespeare's play
the situation is reversed, as Hamlet himself feels estranged to the point of madness in a court that is going
about its orderly business as usual. These differences relate to a more fundamental dissimilarity between the
plays, for Hamlet is not in control, but rather is being watched and monitored in a court run with some
efficiency by Claudius. Hamlet thinks of himself as subject to the whims of unstable Fortune, or assaulted by
her “slings and arrows,” which tend to disable the “discourse of reason.”2 As noted earlier, his neglect of
revenge has troubled many interpreters of the play, who tend to see Hamlet as “a man with a deed to do who
for the most part conspicuously fails to do it” (Jenkins 139-40, Foakes 35-40). Hence the long tradition of regarding Hamlet as irresolute, paralyzed in will, unhealthy, morbid, neurotic, a dreamer who appears a very disturbing figure in the context of Western ideologies that value men of decision and action who are ready to do their duty. It should not surprise that many actresses have taken on the role, and that Hamlet has been appropriated critically as “sensitive, intellectual, and feminine” (French 158, Foakes 24-6, Thompson and Taylor 42-50).

The idea that Hamlet fails to carry out an appointed task or duty is based on his encounter with the Ghost of his father in act 1, and our understanding of this encounter relates to the presentation of the Ghost in the opening scene. There the Ghost appears as a “warlike form,” in “the very armor he had on / When he the ambitious Norway combated,” according to Horatio, who speaks as if he had witnessed the battle with his own eyes. Not until near the end of the play does it emerge that the old King fought old Fortinbras thirty years previously, on the very day Hamlet was born (5.1.147), so that Horatio, his fellow-student, and presumably about the same age as Hamlet, cannot have seen old Hamlet at that time. This inconsistency is not noticed in performance, nor often in reading, and seems designed to establish an image of old Hamlet as a warrior king. Shakespeare had recently worked on *Julius Caesar*, which could have influenced his use of classical names in *Hamlet*, such as Horatio, Marcellus, Claudius, and Laertes, and also his references to Caesar and the classical deities, but this classical contextualization goes deeper. In the Quarto, Horatio recalls in this scene the apparitions that preceded the fall of Julius Caesar in “the most high and palmy state of Rome,” thereby associating old Hamlet directly with ancient Rome, but these lines were omitted from the Folio, possibly cut in performance because they do not advance the action, or alternatively because they mislead by suggesting the Ghost is merely a portent of disasters to come. However, the passage shows how Shakespeare's mind was working to create a complex idea of the Ghost. He is represented as not only a sort of epic figure, at once associated with ancient history, with old battles fought against Norway, and with heroic values, but also as someone known to Horatio, and connected to a present moment when it seems that history may repeat itself in an invasion of Denmark by young Fortinbras.

The Ghost probably startled the first audience to see *Hamlet* staged by its appearance in armor—the only ghost in early modern English drama to be so costumed (Prosser 120, 255). With his “martial stalk” he seems to emerge from an ancient time when fighting was the normal way to conduct affairs, and this “portentous figure,” as he is called by Barnardo, is linked by Horatio with the portents and ghosts or “scheeted dead” that squeaked and gibbered in the streets of Rome before the assassination of Julius Caesar (1.1.113-25). Yet he is also old Hamlet to the life, so that Horatio reports to Hamlet, “I think I saw him yesternight” (1.2.189), his beard grizzled “as I have seen it in his life” (1.2.240). By this time, Hamlet has already, in his “O that this too sullied flesh would melt” soliloquy, compared his father with Hyperion the sun-god and with Hercules (1.2.140, 153), so enhancing his association with the classical world. The Ghost who interviews Hamlet late in act 1 in effect becomes the living man again, gesturing, passionate, bearded, armed, and carrying his marshal's truncheon, an actor visibly turning into Hamlet's father when he begins to speak. He carries the authority not only of a “supernatural being, King and father” (Hibbard 185), but also of the martial heroes of the classical world. But Hamlet has responded to the appearance of the Ghost with his cry,

Angels and ministers of grace defend us!
Be thou a spirit of health or goblin damned,
Bring with thee airs from heaven or blasts from hell,
Be thy intents wicked or charitable,
Thou comest in such a questionable shape
That I will speak to thee.

(1.4.39-44)

All those forms of authority are thus put in question in relation to a Christian pattern of values, and the Ghost is “questionable” not only as inviting question, but also as doubtful, of uncertain origin. Furthermore, the
Ghost's first words suggest he has come from Hell ("sulphurous and tormenting flames") or Purgatory (where his "foul crimes" are to be "burnt and purged away"), and his intents appear to be wicked rather than charitable. When he addresses Hamlet directly, he speaks in the voice of a Senecan revenger, invoking classical values again in calling on Hamlet to "Revenge his foul and most unnatural murder" (1.5.25).

HAMLET

Murder?

GHOST

Murder most foul, as in the best it is,
But this most foul, strange and unnatural.

HAMLET

Haste me to know't, that I, with wings
As swift as meditation or the thoughts of love
May sweep to my revenge.

(1.5.26-31)

Hamlet's immediate reaction to the Ghost's words is often taken as signifying an acceptance of a duty to revenge: "He now also has his directive, a commission that is also a mission. His reaction to the Ghost is like a religious conversion" (Edwards 39, 45). Hamlet's first response, however, is spoken in the context of the Ghost's Christian qualification of his Senecan call for revenge: in condemning murder as "most foul" at the best, he thus exhorts Hamlet to kill his murderer and at the same time denounces the idea of revenge killing (Alexander 45-46).

As the Ghost continues with his long account of Gertrude transferring her affections to Claudius, and of Claudius poisoning him, his emphasis is on the sinful nature of these events and on the horrible effects of the poison on his body. The Ghost is troubled with a moral disgust on the one hand, and a physical revulsion on the other, and the two meet in his sermonizing about Gertrude's behavior:

So lust, though to a radiant angel linked,
Will sate itself in a celestial bed
And prey on garbage

(1.5.55-57)

The moral and physical disgust associated with lust and garbage is seen also in the Ghost's horror both at the appearance of his body, covered by the poison with a "loathsome crust," and at being denied the sacraments at his death. This talking Ghost becomes flesh, a living actor, in his anxiety about what happened to his body, and in his outrage at the idea that the "royal bed of Denmark" should become "[a] couch for luxury and damned incest" (1.5.83). The Ghost's moral outrage, expressed in Christian terms, echoes that expressed by Hamlet in his first soliloquy in 1.2, who, like his father, thinks of the marriage of Claudius and Gertrude as incestuous (1.2.157); the Ghost adds adultery as a further charge (1.5.41). Both also have a kind of voyeuristic horror in imagining what goes on in the "incestuous sheets" of the "royal bed."
In the Ghost's long narrative the idea of revenge becomes diluted, and almost lost, especially as he ends by telling Hamlet to leave his mother to her conscience and to heaven. His final imperative is “Remember me,” and this is what catches Hamlet's attention:

> Ay, thou poor ghost, whiles memory holds a seat  
> In this distracted globe. Remember thee?  
> Yea, from the table of my memory  
> I'll wipe away all trivial fond records,  
> All saws of books, all forms, all pressures past  
> That youth and observation copied there,  
> And thy commandment all alone shall live  
> Within the book and volume of my brain,  
> Unmixed with baser matter

(1.5.95-104)

Hamlet indeed dwells above all on remembering the Ghost, and wiping away all other records he has kept in the notebook of his memory. But what does he mean by the “commandment” he wants to register there? The Ghost's imperatives have shifted from “Revenge” (25) through “bear it not” (81) and “Taint not thy mind” (85) to “Remember me” (91). The word “commandment” incorporates “command,” appropriate to a figure appearing as a great warrior and wielding a marshal's truncheon, and this is how Hamlet recalls this moment later in 3.4, when he expects the Ghost, appearing for the third time, to chide him for neglecting to carry out his “dread command.” In 1.5, however, “commandment” had a much more immediate sense for Shakespeare and his audience, one derived from its use in the Bible, specifically in relation to the ten commandments given by God to Moses, which were by law inscribed or hung on the walls of parish churches in England. Prominent among them is the injunction, “Thou shalt not kill,” so that the term in itself contains the contradictory impulses that characterize both the Ghost and Hamlet, namely a quasi-Senecan desire for revenge, and a Christian inhibition against taking life.

In his study Pagan Virtue, John Casey argues that “we inherit a confused system of values; that when we think most rigorously and realistically we are ‘pagans’ in ethics, but that our Christian inheritance only allows a fitful sincerity about this” (Casey 225-6). He observes that our society admires qualities derived from the ancient Greeks and Romans, what he calls the “irascible” virtues, “pride and shame, a sense of the noble, a certain valuing of courage and ambition,” as against compassion, meekness, pity, and love, qualities that we associate with Christ. He thinks King Lear shows that Shakespeare was confused, that the play “uncomfortably combines, without reconciling, ‘pagan’ and Christian elements” (Casey 212, 225). I think what Hamlet demonstrates is that Shakespeare was fully aware of the differences between these inherited sets of values and used them in establishing the character and dilemma of his protagonist. Hamlet sees his father in ideal terms, associating him with classical deities and heroes, Hyperion, Jupiter, Mercury, and Hercules. Old Hamlet is established for us in the opening scene by Horatio as a warrior who challenged old Fortinbras to single combat and killed him, and Hamlet's remarks about his father confirm this image of a hero from the past, possessing “An eye like Mars to threaten and command” (3.4.57). Old Hamlet represents martial honor, is associated with the irascible virtues, and is distanced into something of a mythical figure—doubly distanced in the past history of Denmark, and by association with the classical world.

Hamlet is represented as a student, whose training in the classics is reflected in his language, in his image of his father, and in other ways, as when he invites the players to rehearse a speech describing the death of Priam based on the Aeneid. For Hamlet, his father is measured against the heroes of the Trojan war. In challenging old Fortinbras, old Hamlet behaved like the heroes of the Iliad, making courage a prime virtue, and courting death in war: “[I]n heroic societies life is the standard of value. If someone kills you, my friend or brother, I owe you their death and when I have paid my debt to you their friend or brother owes them my death” (MacIntyre 117). In that simpler world of masculine values, revenge could be seen as a virtuous act, but this is
not the world invoked in the Player's speech narrating the revenge taken for the death of his father Achilles by Pyrrhus, whose “roused vengeance” drives him to butcher the old king, “mincing” his limbs in full view of Queen Hecuba. The speech brings out the full horror of what Pyrrhus does, insuring that, in spite of the classical imagery, and the attribution of blame to Fortune, as though it is Priam's bad luck to suffer thus, the “hellish” (2.2.463) deed of the black and bloody murderer is condemned.

Hearing this speech prompts Hamlet to a tirade against himself, first for not having spoken out, like the player, and then for doing nothing but unpacking his heart with words. He does not threaten direct action against Claudius,⁶ and slides from cursing into reflection; though “prompted” to revenge, as for the moment he claims, “by heaven and hell” (2.2.584), he goes on to question whether the Ghost may be “a devil” tempting him to damnation. So he shifts from a heroic stance applauding the idea of revenge to a Christian anxiety about the nature of the Ghost, and ends by deciding to try to “catch the conscience of the king,” using the New Testament term that specifically signifies a consciousness of sin, and might suggest that Hamlet relates Claudius to those sinners who condemned the woman taken in adultery and were “convicted by their own conscience” (John, 8.9).

Hamlet's shift from Thyestean revenge to Christian conscience parallels the Ghost's turn away from his demand for revenge to his call to Hamlet to leave Gertrude to her conscience. The Ghost does not represent the simple heroic warrior Hamlet imagines, but a more complex figure who defines virtue not in terms of a heroic code but in relation to lust. In the Iliad, women are taken by the victors in battle as spoils of war, but the Christian morality that the Ghost preaches is focused on sexual relations, and he is especially outraged by thoughts of incest and adultery, as if he has in mind Christ's sermon on the mount, “whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart” (Matthew 5.28). The Ghost's concern here in 1.5 in turn echoes Hamlet's thought in his first soliloquy, where he, too, is already tainted in his mind by his disgust with sullied flesh, and by his mother's marriage to Claudius. Indeed, he begins by rejecting suicide because “the Everlasting” has “fixed / His canon 'gainst self-slaughter” (1.2.131-2), apparently recalling the sixth of the ten commandments, “Thou shalt not kill.” When Hamlet modulates in his “O, what a rogue and peasant slave am I” soliloquy from cursing and shouting for vengeance into worrying that the Ghost may be a devil, he again seems trapped in the conflict between the heroic ethos exemplified for him by the image he has of his father, and the Christian values the Ghost and he also share, and which are assumed as a common frame of reference by the other characters.

Hamlet takes the performance of The Mousetrap as causing Claudius, “frighted with false fire,” to reveal his guilt when he suddenly calls for lights and leaves the stage, though it may well be, as Guildenstern reports, that Claudius is angered and frightened by something else: He has heard Hamlet identify the murderer in the play as “nephew to the king” (3.2.244),—pointing threateningly to himself as a potential murderer of his uncle. However that may be, Hamlet seems prepared to act in “the witching time of night” (3.2.358) as he goes to “speak daggers” (3.2.365) to his mother and encounters Claudius at prayer. Claudius has just admitted to the audience his offense in a reference to the first murderer, Cain:

\[
\text{It hath the primal eldest curse upon 't,}\n\text{A brother's murder.}\n\]

(3.3.37-38)

Inevitably, it seems, Hamlet is inhibited from carrying out a murder that would be analogous, the killing of a blood relative, now that he has the perfect opportunity. It is, of course, ironic that his chance comes when Claudius is kneeling, as if he were a silent embodiment of contrition, so that Hamlet is stymied by the thought that his uncle might go to heaven rather than to hell if he is killed while praying. Whenever Hamlet reflects upon revenge, he cannot carry it out because the very idea clashes with his awareness of biblical injunctions against taking life.
What happens when Hamlet comes into the presence of his mother in 3.4 is therefore crucial in the action of the play. He forces her to sit down, physically handling her in a way that makes her cry out, fearing he may murder her, and in response to her shout, “Help, ho!,” a voice is heard from behind an arras or curtain, “What ho! Help!” Hamlet does not identify the voice, but draws his sword and stabs it through the curtain.

It is the first time he has not paused to reflect, and his act seems spontaneous. When Gertrude asks what he has done, he replies, “Nay, I know not. Is it the King?” Hamlet has worked himself up in preparation for the “bitter business” of his verbal attack on his mother, and, concentrating with all his force on the harsh things he has to say to her, he cannot bear to be interrupted. His reaction to the discovery that he has killed Polonius is callous, since all his attention is concentrated on forcing Gertrude to share his disgust with her marriage to Claudius, and persuading her to forego

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{the rank sweat of an enseamed bed},
\text{Stewed in corruption, honeying and making love}
\text{Over the nasty sty.}
\end{align*}
\]

(3.4.92-94)

She has risen to see what Hamlet has done, as he presumably draws the arras and reveals the body, and, bidding a quick farewell to Polonius as a “wretched, rash, intruding fool,” he turns back to her, once again making her sit down and listen to him. What has he done? It is not premeditated murder, or a crime passionel, since his passion is directed against his mother in the scene, and he does not know whom he has stabbed. It is not an accident, though there is an accidental aspect to the deed in that stabbing blindly through an arras might merely wound rather than kill. Hamlet hopes he may have killed the King, but really has no idea who is hiding. One might argue that he transfers his anger with his mother momentarily to the figure behind the arras, or that his frustration in passing up the chance to kill Claudius at prayer causes this sudden act of violence, but there is no adequate explanation for why Hamlet behaves as he does. His killing of Polonius is best thought of as a lashing out, a spontaneous act that may in some way release pent-up feelings and frustrations associated with his uncle, his mother, Ophelia, and the general state of affairs in Denmark, but it remains in the end inexplicable. It is a primal act of violence.\(^7\)

Hamlet continues for about 150 lines to excoriate his mother in his anxiety to persuade her not to sleep with her present husband, Claudius, and ends by pleading,

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Forgive me this my virtue;}
\text{For in the fatness of these pursy times}
\text{Virtue itself of vice must pardon beg …}
\end{align*}
\]

(3.4.152-54)

His words, with their generalizing stress on gross physicality in the overtones of “fatness” and “pursy” or flabby recall the Ghost’s confidence in generalizing about his “virtue”:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{But virtue, as it never will be moved,}
\text{Though lewdness court it in a shape of heaven,}
\text{So lust, though to a radiant angel linked,}
\text{Will sate itself in a celestial bed,}
\text{And prey on garbage.}
\end{align*}
\]

(1.5.53-57)

Like his father’s, Hamlet’s “virtue” is focused in his horror at her sexual behavior, and, as if to pull him back from his obsession with sex, the Ghost returns, seen only by Hamlet, to whet his “blunted purpose,” and
remind him of more important matters. In the first Quarto the stage direction calls for the Ghost to enter “in
his night gown,” not in the armor he wore in act 1, as if the actor who played in this shortened version adapted
his costume to a bedchamber, and there may have been deliberate irony in so clothing the Ghost when his
words are more appropriate to a warlike figure, since they serve to remind Hamlet about revenge. Since the
Queen does not see the Ghost, the audience may think it is a hallucination perceived only by Hamlet,
confirming his eccentric behavior, which Gertrude regards as madness and so reports to Claudius in the next
scene (4.1.7). The ironies are compounded in Hamlet's speeches, which are rational except for their obsessive
concern with sex, which is morally disgusting to him in a way that the killing of Polonius is not. Polonius is
dismissed and then forgotten for 120 lines, after which Hamlet rewrites what he has done by appointing
himself as heaven's agent of punishment:

I do repent. But heaven hath pleased it so
To punish me with this and this with me,
That I must be their scourge and minister.

(3.4.172-75)

Here Hamlet abandons all of his earlier wrestlings with conscience and with the biblical injunction against
killing. He casually pushes responsibility away from himself with no remorse, treating the corpse with a
mocking detachment as he makes his exit, lugging “the guts into the neighbor room.” Has the body of
Polonius, bloodied from the sword-thrust, been visible on stage throughout the scene? If so, it would serve as
a reminder of the disparity between Hamlet's fixation on sex and his lack of concern about a man he has
killed.

Hamlet has accused his mother of making “sweet religion” into a “rhapsody of words,” or meaningless
medley, which is, ironically, what he now does himself by claiming to be the instrument of providence.
Gertrude tells Claudius that Hamlet weeps for what he has done (4.1.27), but the Hamlet we see again in the
following scenes seems unconcerned, as he puts on his antic disposition in mockingly talking to Rosencrantz
and Guildenstern and then to the King about what he has done with the body of Polonius.

After his sudden act of violence his attitude to the idea of killing and death changes rapidly, the biblical
commandments are forgotten, and he openly promises that Claudius will soon follow Polonius on his way to
heaven or hell (4.3.35-37). At this point Hamlet is dispatched to England, and is offstage for about five
hundred lines, while the action focuses on Ophelia and Laertes. When we see him again, in the graveyard
scene, he is brooding over skulls on the leveling that death brings. He links the first skull thrown up by the
Gravedigger to Cain: “How the knave jowls it to the ground, as if 'twere Cain's jawbone, that did the first
murder” (5.1.76-77). Whereas Claudius sees himself as Cain committing a “brother's murder,” Hamlet refers
only to the primal act of murder, something he repeated in killing Polonius. The scene points up his casual
attitude to death since he stabbed through the arras, while also marking his acceptance of the idea of his own
death and its insignificance in relation to that of Caesar or Alexander the Great. But then comes the great
shock of discovering that Ophelia is dead, and he realizes that the gravediggers have been preparing for the
burial of her body. This is the only death that moves him, not to a recognition that he might be to blame for
her suicide, but rather to anger at the ostentatious grieving of Laertes: “the bravery of his grief did put me /
Into a towering passion” (5.2.79-80).

Hamlet has no compunction about sending Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to their deaths in England (“They
are not near my conscience,” 5.2.58, F only), and now accepts (also in lines found only in F) the idea of
killing Claudius, “is't not perfect conscience, / To quit him with this arm?” (5.2.67-68). This passage from “To
quit him …” (5.2.68-81) may have been omitted by accident or cut in performance because it makes Hamlet's
intentions too explicit, but it is revealing, especially in the use of the word “conscience” in a sense that
conflicts with biblical usage, as in 1 Timothy 1.5 (Geneva text): “the end of the commandment is love out of a pure heart, and of a good conscience, and of faith unfeigned”—in biblical terms, it is not possible to kill with a good conscience. After he stabs Polonius, Hamlet increasingly displays a sardonic acceptance of the idea of death, and learns to distance himself from what he has done by claiming he is an agent of providence, and that his conscience is untroubled. By openly showing his hostility to Claudius, he has insured that sooner or later they will clash as “mighty opposites” (5.2.62), and he resigns himself to providence in the knowledge that death awaits him: “If it be now, ’tis not to come. If it be not to come, it will be now” (5.2.220-22). What he has done has made him ready to accept his own death (“The readiness is all.”), but still not dedicated to revenge. It is only after he has his own death wound that he turns the poisoned weapon on Claudius, not in a plotted revenge, but in a spontaneous act of retaliation.

In neglecting his revenge, Hamlet is not “stifled by remembrance” (Kerrigan 186) so much as by his inheritance of conflicting classical and Christian values. The heroic code he associates with his father urges him to action, while the Christian code that is given lip-service in Claudius's Denmark condemns revenge and inhibits him from murder most foul. A ruler, however bad, may be God's “minister” in punishing the evil subjects do, according to St. Paul, as “a revenger to execute wrath upon him that doeth evil” (Romans 13.4), and the people must accept this, “for conscience sake.” Hamlet is not the king, but he claims the prerogative of a ruler in the role of “scourge and minister” after killing Polonius. From this point on, he likes to associate his actions with Providence, whereas earlier he had seen himself as subject to Fortune, contrasting himself with Horatio, the embodiment of Senecan stoicism. As long as he contemplates the idea of revenge, Hamlet cannot sustain resolution, finding “conscience does make cowards of us all” (3.1.82), and it is his exploration of this issue that makes the “To be or not to be” soliloquy so central in the play.

Only in his last soliloquy, omitted from the Folio text, does he find in Fortinbras an inspiring warrior image resembling that of his father, marching off to fight a war merely for honor, who might prevent Hamlet from “thinking too precisely on the event” (4.4.41) if it were not that this encounter occurs as he is on his way to England; furthermore, this soliloquy is present only in Q2, not in the Folio or Q1, and was probably omitted in performance not only because it duplicates Hamlet's self-denunciation in his earlier soliloquy, “O what a rogue and peasant slave am I,” without advancing the action, but also because the momentum of that action has already shifted toward a final showdown with Claudius consequent upon the killing of Polonius and the open hostility to the King shown by Hamlet. Another self-questioning soliloquy is unnecessary (Foakes 92-94). Fortinbras resembles old Hamlet as a warrior prince, but now he is not, as Horatio supposed in the opening scene, aiming to attack Denmark to recover lands old Hamlet fought to win, but setting off for Poland to fight for a worthless patch of ground in the name of honor.

Thus, insofar as Hamlet is a revenge tragedy, Laertes is the revenger figure, who, in Senecan fashion, is willing, unlike Hamlet, to reject “conscience” and “dare damnation” (4.5.133-34) to get his revenge for the death of his father, and cut Hamlet's throat in the church (4.7.126). He returns from France equipped with a deadly poison he can apply to a rapier (4.7.141), and proceeds to plot with Claudius a scenario that will insure the death of Hamlet. Laertes, of course, only finds out in 4.5 that his father has been killed, so the subplot of revenge is worked out swiftly, but in most respects Laertes from this point becomes a revenger like Vindice or Pyrrhus, and in his difference from Hamlet reveals something about the limitations of the revenge play. Revenge is a frequent motif in drama, but there are, in truth, few major revenge plays, since the basic plot offers limited possibilities of diversity. Revenge is always reactive, secondary, a response to some previous deed, and the most powerful tragedies develop from some primal act of violence.

Hamlet remains central in European and American culture as a work that continually challenges interpretation. Although commonly characterized as a revenge tragedy, a concern with the idea of revenge rarely figures in the way Hamlet has been characterized:
The Romantics freed Hamlet the character from the play into an independent existence as a figure embodying nobility, or at least good intentions, but disabled from action by a sense of inadequacy, or a diseased consciousness capable of seeing the world as possessed by things rank and gross in nature, and hence a failure. Hamletism gained currency as a term to describe not only individuals, but the failings of intellectuals, political parties, or nations, and so Hamlet was restored to the public arena to characterize the condition of Germany, or Europe, or the world, or the decline of aristocracy in the face of democracy. As the idea of Hamletism prospered, so it came to affect the way the play was seen, and the most widely accepted critical readings of it have for a long time presented us with a version of Shakespeare's play reinfected, so to speak, with the virus of Hamletism, and seen in its totality as a vision of failure in modern men or even in Man himself.

(Foakes 44)

Hamlet has often been extrapolated from the play as someone who reflects, hesitates, is inhibited from acting, or as one who is oppressed by a corrupt world in which action is useless. Such versions of the Prince ignore much that is in the play, but in focusing on action or inaction they are responding in some sense to a central issue in the play, which is not the matter of revenge, but rather the control or release of instinctual drives to violence. If the “How all occasions” lines are omitted, Hamlet's last major soliloquy is “To be or not to be,” a question that has immediately to do not with suicide, but with action:

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.

(3.1.56-59)

To “take arms,” like his father, would mean to kill, which was accepted as part of a heroic code, but is rejected by Christian commandments. Hamlet is trapped in the contradictions between the two codes, which make him a great exponent of the problem of violence. There is no solution; having passed up a chance to revenge himself on Claudius and worked himself into a passionate state on his way to confront his mother, he spontaneously stabs through the arras to kill Polonius. This act is a rite of passage, and makes it easy for him to send Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to their deaths, and to resign himself to his own. His initial act of violence changes his nature, so that he reconstructs himself as the agent of providence in punishing others. He needs to do so in order to live with what he has done. In exploring Hamlet's dilemma, the play probes deeply into the basic problem of human violence and the moral limits of action, and it is a misnomer to call it simply a revenge play.

Notes

1. Neill, 251-61, finely analyzes the emotional and moral ambivalence of remembrance in the play in his treatment of Hamlet as a conventional revenger whose “dream of re-membering the violated past and destroying a tainted order is fulfilled only at the cost of repeating the violation and spreading the taint.”
2. Frye, 113-21, shows how Fortune was opposed to prudence and wisdom in Shakespeare's age.
3. The first use of the word in this latter sense recorded in the Oxford English Dictionary dates from 1607, but Shakespeare surely had both meanings in mind here.
4. The Ghost refers to purgatory and says he was denied the last rites (1.5.77), but these Catholic associations conflict with those of the Senecan revenger, and with the suggestions of hell when the Ghost is heard like a pioneer or miner beneath the stage. Hamlet is understandably confused, but his
first reaction is arguably Protestant, as limited to earth, heaven, and hell: “O all you host of heaven! O earth! What else? / And shall I couple hell?” (1.5.92-93). Hamlet has returned from Wittenberg, the most famous Protestant university, so that once he shakes off the overwhelming sense of his father’s presence, he suspects the apparition may be a devil (2.2.595). The religious affiliations of the Ghost and of Hamlet have been much debated, as by Frye 14-24, by Jenkins 453-54, 457-59, by Prosser 118-42, and by McGee 13-54. I think Shakespeare chose to provide mixed signals about a Ghost that remains questionable still; the significant polarity in the play I believe is between Christian and classical, not between Catholic and Protestant attitudes and beliefs.

5. The Geneva Bible has a marginal gloss here: “But love and preserve thy brother's life.”

6. The cry “Oh Vengeance!” (after 2.2.581) found only in the Folio text is thought by many to be an actor's addition, a rhetorical flourish that runs counter to the flow of the soliloquy; it is omitted from many editions, such as the Arden and the Riverside.

7. In his interesting study of the play Gurr also argued, 76-79, that the killing of Polonius is a turning point in the action.

8. The Geneva text has a marginal gloss here: “Paul sheweth that the end of God's Law is love, which cannot be without a good conscience. …”

9. In the Geneva text a marginal note adds: “For he is the minister of God to take vengeance on him that doth evil.”

Works Cited


The Bible and Holy Scriptures, Geneva version (Geneva, 1560)


### Hamlet (Vol. 82): Further Reading

#### CRITICISM


*Examines how the vulgar (language of the people) and the polite (language of politics) are used against one another in Hamlet. Andreas demonstrates that the polite language used by Claudius is duplicitous, while Prince Hamlet uses the straightforward language of the people to disconcert and expose Claudius and his retinue.*


*Warns against correcting apparent inconsistencies and errors in the text of Hamlet on the basis that those so-called errors may in fact have been intentionally made by Shakespeare.*


*Argues that Hamlet has a Christian basis, which surfaces as soon as Prince Hamlet speaks to what appears to be the ghost of his father.*

Contends that in Hamlet Shakespeare attempted to break away from the Machiavellian form of politics that he had depicted in many of his earlier plays.


Maintains that what makes Prince Hamlet such a memorable character is his “unpretentiousness” as well as his sincere attempt to seek the truth.


Examines the “nunnery scene” in Hamlet.


Deconstructs Hamlet from a psychoanalytical standpoint.


Describes Prince Hamlet as an early modern hero whose mythical stature transcends the boundaries of the play.


Suggests that Hamlet's identity evolves during the course of the play, and that this evolution reflects the growth of the rational mind of the human animal.


Examines Hamlet's apparent sexual disgust with his mother's remarriage to Claudius.


Reviews Michael Almereyda's 2000 film adaptation of Hamlet and asserts that Almereyda's focus on Hamlet's similarities to the world of corporate New York occurs at the expense of the play's other themes.


Analyzes the character of Claudius in a variety of stage performances and contends that Claudius should be played as a “mighty opposite” to Prince Hamlet.


Argues that Hamlet's rescue by the pirates was not accidental but was planned by Prince Hamlet himself.
Critical Essays: Hamlet and A Matter Tender and Dangerous

Hamlet and "A Matter Tender and Dangerous"

See also Hamlet Criticism (Volume 35), and Volumes 37, 44, 59, 71, 82.

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I offer this essay as a contribution to a discernible movement in Shakespeare studies which is once again raising the question of the relation of the plays to early modern religious discourse. For a long time this relationship was addressed in the context of biographical criticism, with the texts being read as cryptic testimonials to Shakespeare's Catholicism, his royalist Anglicanism, his agnosticism, his hostility to Puritanism, and so on. In the new assessment of Shakespeare's work and religion, biographical concerns have been displaced by a focus on the texts as part of a broad cultural order and on the great variety of contemporary discourses that nourish the plays and the dramatic conflicts they represent. The interpretive process is complicated by the issue of censorship, a force difficult to assess but undeniable, and, in the case of Hamlet, by the existence of three different texts with their vast number of variants. Religious discourse is integral to Hamlet, but Shakespeare's representation of religion in the play is oblique and inconsistent, and critics have come to many different conclusions about Hamlet's religious content. The play's inconsistent representation of religion is interesting in itself, and I would argue that to a certain extent the forces producing this instability and the role of religion in the play's ideological drama are accessible to historicist criticism. We can, for example, illuminate the representation of religion in the play by viewing it in relation to Hamlet's subjectivity, which is a principal site of ideological contention. We can also engage with specific religious discourses in the text, among them Roman Catholicism, neo-Stoicism, and Protestantism, and with Shakespeare's representation of their historical and institutional affiliations. To classify Stoicism as a religious discourse is arguable, but it clearly functions as an important constituent in the contemporary synthesis of humanism and Christianity. Considering Stoicism within a religious context illuminates Hamlet's involvement with comprehensive ideological systems and helps to prepare the way for an analysis of his subjective transformation at the end of the play.

The language and theology of Roman Catholicism emerge most clearly in Hamlet in the prince's encounter with his father's spirit, where the Christian and specifically purgatorial context that Shakespeare creates for the Ghost is rather surprising. The play contrasts sharply in this respect with The Spanish Tragedy, where the ghost of Don Andrea inhabits a classical underworld derived from the sixth book of Virgil's Aeneid, a strategy that allows Kyd to avoid the ideological pitfalls of representing a Christian afterlife. The spirit of old Hamlet explicitly identifies his situation beyond the grave, speaking of the "sulph'rous and tormenting flames" to which he must render himself, and of the "certain term" of penance he must endure until "the foul crimes done in my days of nature / Are burnt and purged away" (1.5.3, 10, and 12-13). His complaint that he has gone to his death "unhouseled" and "unaneled" (1.77)—that is, without benefit of the Eucharist and extreme unction—introduces a language that is unambiguously Roman Catholic. The authority of the Ghost's appeal to Hamlet is based in part on a tradition of Catholic discourse in which the power of speech—what Horatio calls "sound or use of voice" (1.1.109)—is given to the suffering dead. In Sir Thomas More's Supplication of Souls (1529), for instance, those tormented in purgatory make their appeal to the living:

If ye pity the blind, there is none so blind as we, which are here in the dark, saving for sights unpleasant, and loathsome, till some comfort come. If ye pity the lame, there is none so lame as we, that neither can creep one foot out of the fire, nor have one hand at liberty to defend our face from the flame. Finally, if ye pity any man in pain, never knew ye pain comparable to ours; whose fire as far passeth in heat all the fires that ever burned upon the earth, as the hottest of all those passeth a feigned fire painted on a wall.
The language that the Ghost uses in his encounter with Hamlet is related to this collective voice of the dead: there is an affinity between More's vocabulary of torment and that found in the play. In a sense the Ghost's "I" is based on the "we" of More's text, deriving part of its authority from the whole community of the dead as identified in a specific dogmatic tradition. What is novel about the Ghost is that it comes not to beg relief for its own pains but to command Hamlet to revenge the death of King Hamlet and to restore order in the temporal political world. But in this displacement the purgatorial context remains pertinent, and the way Hamlet responds to the edict suggests that for him it carries the residual force of a religious obligation.

Emphasis on the torments of purgatory reflects doctrines and practices of late medieval Catholicism which clearly survived into the early modern period in England, but as the sixteenth century progressed, these traditions were steadily undermined by the Reformation. Early Protestants like John Frith and William Tyndale denounced both purgatory and indulgences as priestly stratagems to drain the resources of rich and poor alike. As A. G. Dickens has observed, the government of Edward VI effected in the Chantries Act of 1547 what was in many respects a second Dissolution, taking control of institutions and endowments set aside for prayers for the dead and using them to further secular causes. In contrast to the first Chantries Act of 1545, which stated that the funds from dissolution were needed for the war against France and Scotland, the Edwardian act was aggressively Protestant in doctrine, declaring in its preamble that much superstition and ignorance concerning the true means of salvation had been caused "by devising and phantasying vain opinions of purgatory and masses satisfactory, to be done for them which be departed." The Forty-Two Articles of 1553 and the Thirty-Nine Articles promulgated under Elizabeth denounced the doctrine of purgatory as "a fond thing vainly feigned, and grounded upon no warrant of Scripture, but rather repugnant to the word of God." Thus by the time Shakespeare wrote Hamlet 1.5, the religious doctrine it represents had been vigorously rejected by the established church for half a century. References to purgatory in English Renaissance drama are rare, no doubt in part because it was heretical, and Shakespeare shows a certain daring in establishing the context of the Ghost so plainly.

His reasons for establishing this purgatorial context may be associated with his complicated representation of time in the play, which is set deep in the medieval past but which stages the world of a Renaissance court. It may also be related to his portrayal of Hamlet's mind as a sensitive register of social and historical change. In writing this scene, Shakespeare may have been playing with the hidden or vestigial beliefs of his audience in order to establish a sense of distance between the world of old Hamlet and the official ideology of contemporary England. The Ghost's affiliations are clearly with feudalism and the old religion; it thus represents a social order displaced by the early modern state but still exercising an influence within contemporary institutions. This older society solicits Hamlet in the Ghost's appeal for revenge, an appeal that constructs Hamlet not as a self-conscious Renaissance prince but as a son who must fulfill the responsibilities entailed by an older communitarian identity that binds him to both the living and the dead. Shakespeare portrays Hamlet in this scene as powerless to contest the dictates of his father's spirit, and this inability to counter or qualify his father's cultural authority is evident throughout the play. As Jacques Lacan notes:

There's something very strange in the way Hamlet speaks about his dead father, an exaltation and idealization … which comes down to something like this: Hamlet has no voice with which to say whatever he may have to say about him.

Historicist criticism might apply this psychoanalytical insight as follows: Hamlet's awkwardness in the filial role is symptomatic of his ambivalent relationship to the ideological order represented by his father, a culture whose values he consciously embraces but whose established cultural roles he is unable to perform. Shakespeare makes a point of representing Hamlet as a product of humanism and (more cautiously) of the Reformation, and thus of a material history that he cannot simply, as he vows to do, "wipe away" in an act of will (1.5.99). The rest of the play demonstrates the impossibility of fulfilling this idealist intention, which Hamlet seems to make out of a conscious but tormented loyalty to his father and the older culture he represents, in which the prince's roles are not only those of the unhesitant revenger, the son obedient to the
patriarchal word, but also the devout Catholic who recognizes his solemn responsibility to the souls of the dead.8

But if the spirit of his father intrudes spectacularly to assert the values of medieval society and to impose on his son an older communitarian identity, throughout most of the play Hamlet must negotiate more contemporary political relationships. The central political institution portrayed in Hamlet is the Renaissance court, which is represented as the center of an early modern state led by a powerful monarch and deploying the full apparatus of the new diplomacy. It is also a world of humanist learning, secular politics, and religious division. In this postfeudal context the problem of unique individual identity and self-consciousness has arisen: a sense of self for aristocratic men who are not necessarily bound by older ideologies of religious and secular community. Shakespeare's portrayal of Hamlet is sensitive to this cultural development. He makes the same historical point indirectly in his representation of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, who at first glance seem to belong to patterns of loyalty and group identity specific to the older culture, especially when one considers their devotion to the monarch and their notable lack of individuality. But more careful examination shows that Shakespeare portrays them as thoroughly contemporary, the product of power relations at a Renaissance court. The undifferentiated treatment he gives them is in fact rather novel, and it reveals Shakespeare's awareness of broad historical and institutional change and of the consequences of such change for individual identity. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern seem born at a stroke with the alienated individual subjectivity represented by Hamlet; Shakespeare's conception of their essential sameness is possible only from a perspective in which individual identity has already become a problematic fact. The play suggests that questions of identity never arise for the two courtiers because they are subsumed by the structure of the early modern state. In fact state power accomplishes in their case something similar to what love effects in "The Phoenix and Turtle." In both instances "number" is "slain" ("The Phoenix and Turtle," 1.28), with the difference being that in the play individuality dies not in spiritual union with another but in complete subordination to a newly emerging institutional power.

The play's representation of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern can thus be seen as a testimony to Shakespeare's interest in the power of the early modern state to shape identity, a power that shapes Hamlet's sense of self as well. When Hamlet's place in the state structure becomes vulnerable, his sense of identity is necessarily threatened. Psychological or idealist readings of Hamlet often err by paying insufficient attention to the political position of the prince, who unexpectedly finds himself displaced from the center of the court and regarded as a potential enemy of the state. His introspective brooding and painful sense of individual isolation are in part the result of this sudden estrangement from state power. In attempting to reconcile him to the new reign, Claudius invokes the contemporary humanist discourse of neo-Stoicism, which thus carries with it the institutional authority of the state. Only a few years earlier, in Julius Caesar, Shakespeare had treated Roman Stoicism in its original setting, where it had associations with republicanism and anti-imperial politics. In its Renaissance revival Stoicism retained some of its oppositional potential, but more often it performed a conservative ideological function by projecting an unchanging reality to which the individual subject must adapt. Stoicism counseled self-adjustment rather than political activism and was dismissive or condemning of actual efforts to change the social order. This doctrine had certain advantages for the contemporary aristocracy, which was more completely subject to royal control than its progenitors had been.9 Stoicism could mitigate the pains and minor humiliations of a privileged class for whom the Hotspurian resort to arms was fast becoming a reckless and even futile alternative.10 Although Hamlet is of royal blood, he occupies a position in the play not unlike that of a nobleman in early modern English society. Claudius in fact attempts to impose such a status on the prince when he describes him as "Our chiefest courtier" (1.2.117). One might then expect that neo-Stoicism would emerge in the play as an ideological alternative for Hamlet, a troubled aristocrat who finds himself thwarted and vulnerable to royal power.

The king would certainly like him to embrace this philosophy. In Claudius's first speech (1.2.1-39) he represents himself as a model of Stoic balance worthy of Hamlet's emulation, and he figures the mind as a place where strong emotions and conflicting forces are balanced and reconciled by the sovereign faculty of
reason. The image of a scale functions as the master trope of this speech and of his discourse throughout this crucial public scene. In his efforts to persuade Hamlet, Claudius relies on the Stoic ideology of self-control, invoking its cultural prestige to accuse the prince of immaturity. Speaking like a schoolmaster, he chastens Hamlet for having "A heart unfortified, a mind impatient, / An understanding simple and unschooled" (11. 96-97). The king's discourse suggests how the Stoic concept of the subject can be used to support a conservative ideology of obedience to the existing order, or even to bolster political quietism.

Hamlet is unpersuaded, but it would be wrong to suggest that Stoic discourse has no authority for him or that he simply dismisses it as part of the king's ploy. He later invokes its terms in his elaborate compliment to Horatio, the extravagance of which is apparently embarrassing to both: "Something too much of this," says Hamlet (3.2.72). Hamlet's praise for his friend has a certain manic edge, an intensity that establishes Stoicism as a philosophy of refuge for aristocrats in the play's dynamic representation of ruling-class ideology. Here he uses the Stoic language that Claudius earlier established as normative discourse among the Danish elite and, in doing so, gives it his implicit endorsement. Nevertheless this discourse proves useless to him as a way of ordering his mind or of assisting him in carrying out the will of his father. In fact the play as a whole represents a society in which the ideology of Stoicism is in crisis. Stoicism cannot control the behavior of the prince, though the king invokes the power of the state in making this attempt; and while Claudius pretends to embody Stoic balance, his self-representations are revealed to be a rhetorical overlay for a subjectivity dominated by aggressive sexual and political drives.

The crisis of Stoicism in the play world emerges interestingly in Hamlet's prescriptions for theatrical art. His aesthetic politics are decidedly aristocratic, as his advice to the Player makes clear (3.2.1-35, 38-45). He sets up rules for the actors, urging them to strike a balance between an overly passionate style and one that is "too tame" (1.16), and he speaks about acting in the theater (and by implication beyond it) with an intensity that suggests a deep connection between aesthetics and ideology. According to Hamlet, those performing the drama must strive for balance and "temperance" (1.8), and in achieving this, their "discretion" can be a helpful "tutor" (11. 16-17); his diction suggests how closely his aesthetic theory is related to humanist concepts of identity and conduct. Hamlet reaffirms this conservative aesthetic in his final warning that those who play the clowns should "speak no more than is set down for them," adding that to do otherwise is "villainous, and shows a most pitiful ambition in the fool that uses it" (11. 39 and 43-45). For Hamlet the theater is a polity for which he prescribes an authoritarian government. Because degree must be observed, any self-assertion or departure from one's scripted role is stigmatized as "pitiful ambition." The noun has clear political connotations elsewhere in the play, as when Rosencrantz suggests that it is Hamlet's "ambition" that makes Denmark a prison (2.2.253). Hamlet says that actors who transgress his rules are deserving of punishment, and he specifies the sentence for one who fails to "acquire and beget" the proper temperance: "I would have such a fellow whipped for o'erdoing Termagant" (3.2.7 and 13-14)—surprisingly violent language in a discourse about playacting.

Shakespeare represents Hamlet as craving order and hierarchy in the world of art, perhaps in order to suggest that the prince finds little stability in his own subjective life and in the political life of contemporary Denmark. In the context of the play, Hamlet's theories of acting and playwriting are a reactionary gesture, an attempt to realize or validate in the aesthetic realm a conservative ideology that is failing in his own experience and in the political life of his society. The impossibility of this gesture is made evident by Hamlet's own practice, especially by his antic behavior at the theatrical performance for which he serves as patron. Hamlet there comport's himself as he suggests a grounding might, interpreting the action for other members of the audience (Ophelia says he is "as good as a chorus" [3.2.233]); speaking in sexual innuendo during the intervals ("It would cost you a groaning to take off mine edge" [1. 237]); and harassing the players through sardonic asides and direct address ("Begin, murderer. Pox, leave thy damnable faces and begin" [11. 240-41]). His obtrusive involvement in the performance violates both letter and spirit of his critical principles, and thus his theory of a decorous aristocratic theater is undermined by his own ebullient practice.
This contradiction helps to confirm that in the world of the play the ideologies of Stoicism and humanism are failing more generally, even if Hamlet's behavior here can be explained to a considerable extent by his stated intention to be "idle" (1.88). In the sequence of scenes at the center of the play, Hamlet invokes and attempts to conduct himself according to humanist ideals. But he repeatedly subverts them, as in the scene with Ophelia, who, in lamenting Hamlet, sees his role as a "scholar" as an important part of his courtly identity (3.1.154). Hamlet briefly addresses her in the mode prescribed by contemporary aristocratic culture, but he soon assaults her with language based on the concept of original sin: "for virtue cannot so inoculate our old stock but we shall relish of it" (11.119-21). Hamlet's language here, with its emphasis on human depravity, may suggest the influence of Protestant culture while containing within it a fundamental challenge to the ideologies of aristocratic humanism. In Act 3 it is clear that Hamlet can no longer inhabit the conceptual order constituted by Stoicism and humanist culture more generally, even though at certain moments of the play, as when he praises Horatio or expounds his program for an aristocratic theater, he is capable of giving its values enthusiastic assent.

Shakespeare thus represents Hamlet in the throes of an ideological unhousing from both the residual and dominant cultural systems of Danish society. Neither the feudal Catholic world nor the humanist Renaissance court can provide him with a secure identity or an ideological basis for action. In the odd locution of Marcellus, which seems to announce the play's interest in the relationship between objective ideological systems and individual consciousness, Hamlet cannot "let belief take hold of him" (1.1.22). As a result Hamlet's relationship to his culture in general becomes highly self-conscious and essentially critical. The ideological voracity of this manic and introspective Hamlet is evident through most of the play, but the critical Hamlet finally passes from the scene during the episode at sea. Two divergent readings of this apparent discontinuity in the representation of Hamlet's character might be cited here. Francis Barker has argued that this shift should be read not in terms of realism or "character development" but rather as a "quasi-Brechtian" device in which a melancholy agnostic is supplanted by a "man of action"; in ideological terms Barker regards this change as basically reactionary. Through most of the play Hamlet has questioned the fundamental beliefs of his society, but for Barker he "goes to his death inserted into the traditional Christian values." In a notable reading Harold Bloom agrees that on Hamlet's return from the sea his character is "radically" changed, but he reads the ideological bearings of this change quite differently than Barker. For Bloom what we "overhear" is "an ethos so original that we still cannot assimilate it." The "urgency" of the earlier Hamlet is gone, and the prince now embodies an "achieved serenity," a "mysterious and beautiful disinterestedness" that cannot be illuminated by references to late Elizabethan culture. For Bloom, Hamlet's newly acquired disinterestedness, far from being a reactionary step, is dazzlingly progressive, effectively transcending both his private disillusionment and contemporary Christianity.

Rather than viewing Hamlet's change as a regressive failure of nerve or a transhistorical advance, I suggest that we investigate more closely the precise nature of this change and evaluate its consequences in the field of early modern ideology. In these terms it can be argued that the impasse in which Hamlet finds himself is broken in the final act by the emergence of a specifically Protestant discourse of conscience and of God's predestinating will. The "mysterious and beautiful disinterestedness" that Bloom finds so striking may be understood in late-sixteenth-century terms as the poise of a soul that has come to know its dependence on the will of an utterly transcendent God. C. S. Lewis rightly emphasized the importance of a specific kind of religious experience in the lives and thought of early modern Protestants. He characterized this experience as one of "catastrophic conversion" in which the gift of faith bestowed by the grace of God results in a buoyant sense of subjective liberation, a "farewell to the self with all its good resolutions, anxiety, scruples, and motive-scratchings." Lewis's description of the mental state that precedes the experience of regenerating grace might also serve to describe Hamlet as Shakespeare represents him through the first four acts of the play. Lewis's account may exaggerate the emotionalism and suddenness of the early modern conversion experience, which in orthodox terms was usually conceived as the dawning of grace, the culmination of a gradual process of spiritual discipline. Nevertheless, a rhetoric of the Utopian liberation of the spirit can be found in the classic Protestant texts, a liberation that could not always be circumscribed by qualifying
theological commentary.\textsuperscript{18} That the play implicitly represents such a conversion or regeneration is a plausible hypothesis. Even if one rejects this reading, there remains substantial evidence for a change corresponding with such an experience in Shakespeare's representation of Hamlet in the final act.

Earlier passages in the play establish Protestantism as a relevant discourse, and they suggest that Hamlet's transformation may develop out of the ideological preoccupations of the text as a whole. Consider for instance the conspicuous references to Wittenberg in the first act. That Hamlet should be educated at Wittenberg may be Shakespeare's original contribution to the story, since there is no mention of this in the surviving sources. The role of this university as a cradle of religious revolution would likely be a significant part of its identity for a contemporary audience. By making a point of giving the prince this experience, Shakespeare places him at the source of radical Protestantism. Shakespeare may also show a knowledge of recent history in associating the university with sixteenth-century Danish politics. After spending time at Wittenberg, the Danish monk Hans Tausen returned home to preach Lutheran doctrine in 1525, and the Reformation movement in Denmark was furthered by King Christian II (another visitor to Wittenberg), who ordered the production of a Danish Bible. Christian III had attended the Diet of Worms and had become a devotee of Luther, and he summoned an envoy from Wittenberg to perform his coronation in 1536. Luther himself approved the ordinance of 1537 which ultimately created a Protestant national church in Denmark.\textsuperscript{19} Shakespeare may thus refer his audience to a contemporary society in which the established church was thoroughly reformed and evoke Protestant associations against the medieval Catholic traditions still alive in the play.

One can argue further that the history of Protestantism functions as a kind of subtext in \textit{Hamlet}, surfacing occasionally in ways that are barely articulate. One such moment occurs when Hamlet, brought before Claudius to explain the whereabouts of Polonius, tells the king he is "At supper … Not where he eats, but where a is eaten. A certain convocation of politic worms are e'en at him. Your worm is your only emperor for diet" (4.3.18 and 20-22). As many critics of the play have noted, these lines seem to contain a scrambled allusion to the Diet of Worms, convened by the Emperor Charles V in 1521. Luther was called to be examined before this "convocation," at which he upheld the authority of his own experience against the assembled powers of the Holy Roman Empire and the Catholic Church. Hamlet is under guard here, and his allusion to this famous confrontation might be stimulated by his own encounter with the power of Claudius and by a deep identification with the figure of an individual confronting the institutional establishment. His image of the imperial worm, suggesting the devouring nature of established power, follows very closely in stage time the eating metaphor he uses to describe the king's cynical manipulation of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern: "He keeps them, like an ape an apple in the corner of his jaw, first mouthed to be last swallowed" (4.2.16-18). The imagery of eating and swallowing links these passages with other Shakespearean evocations of tyrannical power and may suggest that Hamlet's perception of his struggle with Claudius is growing less personal and increasingly political.

Shakespeare's emphasis on individual conscience also contributes to the Protestant character of Hamlet's religion in the last act. As it developed in Protestant thought, the term \textit{conscience} came to mean not just a faculty of moral censorship but a medium through which the individual could receive the revealed truth of a distant God. In the Protestant understanding it became less a severe judge keeping the subject timid and fearful and more an alternative authority that could function as a source of moral justification. The Puritan theologian William Perkins, following Calvin, elevated conscience to a position above human law and beneath God; in doing so, he provided a theological argument capable of undermining his basic social conservatism.\textsuperscript{20} David Little has written that in Perkins's system it is the genuine Christian who grasps what the ends of earthly law actually are, since the consciences of the elect stand above this law in a new order where the aims of human law will ultimately be fulfilled. He goes on to say that this position is fundamentally at odds with the views of contemporaries like Whitgift, Hooker, and Coke, for whom human and divine law more nearly coincide.\textsuperscript{21} In England the Puritan emphasis on the ability of the individual to criticize or oppose the state was based in large measure on this new discourse of conscience. Christopher Hill has argued for the
progressive political effects of this discourse but has also noted that the idea of a "priesthood of all believers … was logically a doctrine of individualist anarchy," with reformed churches having no external checks against the authority of the individual conscience they otherwise served to encourage.22

In Shakespeare's representation of Hamlet's subjective history there is a recapitulation of this broad historical movement from a medieval to a Reformation concept of conscience. Interest in this change is evident in the play as a whole, with the term conscience appearing more often in Hamlet than in any other Shakespeare tragedy. In the course of the play, conscience ceases to be an impediment to the prince and becomes an authority that licenses him to think and act with greater freedom. The Hamlet who, after contriving the deaths of his former friends, can say "They are not near my conscience" (5.2.59), or who can say that it would be "perfect conscience" (1.68) to kill Claudius, is clearly speaking from a different subject position than the speaker who earlier says that "conscience does make cowards of us all" (3.1.85).23 His concept of conscience as an empowering force seems to derive from a general subjective transformation consistent with Protestant experience, and one important consequence of this change is Hamlet's summary abandonment of reason as a crucial ideological term. The "sovereignty of reason" (1.4.54) over the political microcosm of the mind simply ceases to be an issue, because the Stoic and more generally humanist concept of identity on which this view of reason is based is an ideological casualty in the play. Up until Act 5 Hamlet depicts a society in which the official ideology holds that an individual is defined by his or her place in a rationally ordered universe and by relation to a God whose being and law are accessible to human reason—an ideology of human identity that had just received full expression in the work of Hooker.24 But the final act of the play represents this Christian-humanist ideology as exhausted; Hamlet passes beyond it into a new cultural paradigm, one in which a Protestant concept of conscience supplants reason as the crucial human faculty.

In a parallel change, Hamlet's new perception of the scope and power of providence becomes evident in the graveyard scene. Of one of the skulls tossed up by the gravedigger, he says, "This might be the pate of a politician which this ass o'er-offices, one that would circumvent God, might it not?" (5.1.77-79). By implication, the living politician's self-interested plotting had no more chance against the designs of God than his remains now have against the rough treatment of the sexton. In 5.2, when Hamlet recounts to Horatio the episode at sea, he describes a subjective experience profoundly changed by his newly acquired concept of divinity, as in the speech that Bloom finds particularly important:

\[
\ldots \text{Methought I lay} \\
\text{Worse than the mutines in the bilboes.} \\
\text{Rashly—} \\
\text{And praised be rashness for it: let us know} \\
\text{Our indiscretion sometime serves us well} \\
\text{When our dear plots do pall, and that should} \\
\text{teach us} \\
\text{There's a divinity that shapes our ends,} \\
\text{Rough-hew them how we will.} \ldots \\
(11. 5-11)
\]

This celebration of "indiscretion" contrasts sharply with Hamlet's earlier counsel of "discretion" to the player. In humanist discourse reason is the faculty crucial to understanding divine precepts, but in 5.2.6-11 there is a strong association of rashness with divinity: Hamlet suggests that following his impulses serves to connect him with the divine purpose, and this altered perspective seems to liberate him from debilitating subjective constraints. Later, when Horatio asks him how the new commission was sealed, he replies, "Why, even in that was heaven ordinant" (1. 49), indicating his conviction that providence directed the entire episode.

Hamlet sounds the same new note in refusing to allow Horatio to postpone the fencing match with Laertes:
Not a whit. We defy augury. There's 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.

(II. 165-68)

In Matthew 10:29, Christ tells his disciples that a sparrow "shal not fall on the ground without your Father."25 By alluding to this text, Hamlet projects the vision of a creation governed in every detail by the divine will. Contrary to the argument of Bloom, who maintains that it would be a mistake to regard Protestantism as an important context for this speech, Hamlet's citation of the biblical text has everything to do with the relationship between the individual and God in Reformation Christianity. That Protestantism is relevant here is supported by the First Quarto, which reads "theres a predestinate prouidence in the fall of a sparrow."26 A good case can be made for regarding this adjective as Shakespeare's, rather than as the invention of a hypothetical reporter of the 1603 text. He had used it very recently in Much Ado about Nothing (1.1.128), and it was thus part of the vocabulary he was currently employing. In an analysis of the dialogue leading into this speech, Steven Urkowitz finds one of many instances in which "three different alternative readings appear in equivalent spots in all three versions of Hamlet."27 He goes on to argue that such instances imply authorial "tinkering," a position which adds support for the view that Shakespeare is responsible for "predestinate." It may also be pertinent that the title page of the First Quarto advertises the play as having been acted by Shakespeare's company in the two universities. Predestinate would be a resonant word in those settings—particularly at Cambridge, where advanced Protestant views were common. The speech can be regarded as another moment in the play when the radical Protestant subtext surfaces quite clearly, with the term predestinate being generated by the specific ideological and dramatic moment Shakespeare represents.28

Shakespeare wrote Hamlet at a time when the political consequences of Protestant doctrine were receiving sustained attention. During the 1590s the civil and ecclesiastical establishment in England debated the potential for dissent inherent in predestinarian theology, and many found such potential dangerously high. They feared that if subjects believed themselves to be saved or damned by God's eternal decree, which they could not alter through personal effort, then a great incentive for living a godly and obedient life was lost. That the doctrine of predestination was common knowledge compounded the political problem. An Italian visitor to England in the 1580s reportedly observed that "the very Women and Shopkeepers" were capable of discussing predestination.29 In the last decades of Elizabeth's reign the established church was orthodoxy Calvinist on this point, but many feared the political consequences of Calvin's teachings if they were not carefully interpreted. The bishop of London, Richard Bancroft, endorsed absolute predestination as a theological principle, but over the course of his career he deplored what he regarded as its perversion into a basis of support for oppositional political movements. In 1593 he wrote a tract charging that a group of millenarians, who had recently announced the return of Christ and attempted to seize power for the godly, based its actions in predestinarian theology. Archbishop Whitgift supported the Calvinist Lambeth Articles of 1595, but he may have overestimated the strength of reformed feeling at court and in the church: in December of 1595 Robert Cecil wrote him to say that the queen "mislikes much that any allowance hath been given by your Grace and the rest of any point to be disputed of predestination being a matter tender and dangerous to weak ignorant minds and thereupon requireth your Grace to suspend them."30 Elizabeth had probably been briefed on the Lambeth Articles by Burghley, who objected to them on the same political grounds. A group of Cambridge divines wanted the Lambeth Articles to be given confessional status (to be incorporated with the Thirty-Nine Articles), but there was no support for this at court. The proposal remained on the agenda, however, until the Hampton Court Conference of 1604, when it was effectively defeated. Bishop Bancroft used the occasion to repeat his warning to the king against the political danger of those who lay "all their religion upon predestination."31 James was later advised on this point by his chaplain, Benjamin Carier, who argued that radical Protestant beliefs were unfit "to keepe subjects in obedience to their sovereigns"; he feared the subjects would soon "openly maintayne that God hath as well pre-destinated men to be trayters as to be kinges."32
Hamlet's remark on the fall of the sparrow could thus have touched a sensitive political nerve, especially since in the play he has a plausible claim to the throne and is "loved of the distracted multitude" (4.3.4). The possibility emerges that the Q1 reference to a "predestinate" providence is absent from the Second Quarto and the Folio through self-censorship or even censorship by the government. A reference to predestination in a play about regicide would likely attract attention at a time when the queen and her closest advisors had been ordering the church authorities to suppress any discussion of the issue and when the religiously more conservative reign of James was getting underway. Hamlet realizes a measure of the potential for dissent inherent in the Protestant doctrines of conscience and predestination, and to that extent he illustrates the case made by contemporary authorities who feared the political consequences of reformed theology. The argument that his Christianity in the last act is "traditional" is accordingly incorrect, though this adjective does describe other aspects of his ideological orientation. According to the Protestant concept, the human subject of God's grace was in fact less likely to be politically passive than to be active in the service of causes ratified by individual conscience, an activism evident in the careers of militant Protestant aristocrats like Leicester, Sidney, and Greville. The lives of these men also make it amply clear that members of the elite could hold radical Protestant beliefs and still be social conservatives.

This combination of religious radicalism and social conservatism characterizes Hamlet's position in the final act of the play. Mixing a royal or aristocratic sense of self with radical Protestant beliefs in providence and the authority of conscience was likely to produce volatile results, and Hamlet's religion in Act 5 clearly functions as an oppositional discourse supporting his struggle with the king. But the Utopian promise of his subjective transformation remains mostly unfulfilled. The daring he displays in associating rashness with divinity and his radical transcendence of egocentric concerns in the "readiness is all" speech are signals of a subjectivity liberated from the constraints of conservative Renaissance ideology. But the radicalism of his religion in Act 5 also ends up subserving sharp political practice while stabilizing his conventional aristocratic sense of self. This paradox explains the difficulty of trying to establish the political bearings of Hamlet's change, in which a revolution in the order of subjectivity assists him in bringing down a corrupt government but nevertheless confirms him as a defender of traditional aristocratic society. The possibility of a political union with the people, which Claudius fears and which Laertes manages so easily, is never realized. But Hamlet's ultimate conservatism should not be allowed to obscure what the play represents in the final act: a glimpse of a radical relocation of the human subject beyond both the static identities of the feudal order and the self-centeredness demanded by Renaissance politics. It would, in fact, be surprising if there were no evidence of Protestantism and its powerful redefinition of the place of the subject in a play so thoroughly engaged in testing the ideological resources of contemporary culture. That predestination and its worldly consequences were tender political matters may be an important reason for Shakespeare's rather oblique and suggestive handling of Hamlet's transformation.

Notes


3 See Dickens, 230-33.

4 Quoted in Dickens, 230.

5 Quoted in Dickens, 281.


Of course this older ideological synthesis was not without its contradictions. Medieval Catholicism prohibited revenge, but this Christian prohibition was sometimes superseded among feudal aristocrats by their intense allegiance to a secular code of honor. For a discussion of this code and of how the early modern state, in asserting its exclusive right to judge disputes and mete punishment, attempted to alter and subsume it, see Mervyn James, *Society, Politics, and Culture: Studies in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1986), Uff. James makes an important distinction between the "lineage" society of feudalism and what he calls the "civil" society of the emerging Renaissance state. His discussion helps to clarify the extent to which Shakespeare represents King Hamlet and his son as the products of very different cultural orders.

In "Shakespeare and the Stoicism of Seneca" T. S. Eliot argues for the broad influence of Stoic ideology on Elizabethan and Jacobean drama. He suggests that Stoicism is an attractive philosophy for those who find themselves in "an indifferent or hostile world too big for [them]" and implies that the political and religious turmoil of Shakespeare's England created an environment favorable for its reception (*Elizabethan Essays* [London: Faber and Faber, 1934], 33-54, esp. 41). For a relevant and more specific discussion of the cultural issues challenging contemporary aristocratic men, see Mervyn James's analysis of the multicultural situation that complicated the experience of Essex and others (460).

On the tensions between the traditional aristocracy and the growing power of the state, see Joan KellyGadol, "Did Women Have a Renaissance?" in *Becoming Visible: Women in European History*, Renate Bridenthal, Claudia Koonz, and Susan Stuard, eds., 2d ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987), 175-201, esp. 184ff. Kelly-Gadol offers a reading of *The Courtier* as a text that assisted the European aristocracy in adapting to its changing relationship with royal power. See also

Claudius first uses this trope in referring to the sensitive issue of his marriage to Gertrude:

Therefore our sometime sister, now our queen,
Th' imperial jointress of this warlike state,
Have we as 'twere with a defeated joy, 
In equal scale weighing delight and dole,
Taken to wife.

(1.2.8-14)

It is also true, however, that Hamlet does not want the clowns to prevent the audience from hearing "some necessary question of the play" (3.2.42-43), indicating that he associates drama with an interrogative and possibly progressive function. To a certain extent the early modern closet drama actually performed this role, and the "question" such a play might consider could be as politically sensitive as the issue of tyrannicide.


Calvin speaks of the "spiritual freedom" of the elect and of how this freedom comforts and raises up "the stricken, prostrate conscience, showing it to be free from the curse and condemnation with which the law was pressing it down, bound and fettered. When through faith we lay hold on the mercy of God in Christ, we attain this liberation and, so to speak, manumission from subjection to the law. …" (John Calvin, *Institution of the Christian Religion*, trans. Ford Lewis Battles [Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1975], 44).


In reading Hamlet's use of "conscience" in the 3.1 soliloquy, I agree with Catherine Belsey's view that the meaning of the term is not just awareness but also the faculty of moral judgment; see her "The Case of Hamlet's Conscience," *Studies in Philology* 76 (1979): 127-48.


Steven Urkowitz, "'Well-sayd olde Mole': Burying Three *Hamlets* in Modern Editions" in *Shakespeare Study Today: The Horace Howard Furness Memorial Lectures*, Georgianna Ziegler, ed. (New York: AMS Press, 1986), 37-70, esp. 55 and 62. Paul Werstine suggests that, rather than being preoccupied with the problem of a single authoritative text, we should closely examine "what we have—namely, the early printed texts themselves" (*The Textual Mystery of *Hamlet*," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 39 [1988]: 1-26, esp. 2).
28 Even the term special, found in both Q2 and F, has possible associations with Protestant discourse. In Measure for Measure, a play that seems to have been written at almost the same time as the publication of the Second Quarto of Hamlet, Shakespeare has the Duke use an oddly Protestant discourse when explaining his decision to confer power on Angelo: "For you must know we have with special soul / Elected him. …" (1.1.17-18).

29 This observation is reported in Izaak Walton's "Life of Hooker" and is quoted here from The Compleat Walton, ed. Geoffrey Keynes (London: Nonesuch Press, 1929), 350. For a discussion of the wide dispersion of predestinarian thought, see Nicholas Tyacke, Anti-Calvinists: The Rise of English Arminianism c. 1590-1640 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), 1-2; Tyacke notes that "between 1579 and 1615 at least thirty-nine quarto editions of the Genevan Bible, all printed in England, had a predestinarian catechism bound with them" (2).

30 Quoted in Peter Lake, Moderate puritans and the Elizabethan church (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1982), 228.

31 Quoted in McGee, 169.

32 Quoted in Tyacke, 6.

33 It is tempting to speculate that the First Quarto's "predestinate" reflects the language of a performance text and that it was prudently omitted when the text of Q2 was prepared for the press. The government's scrutiny of drama seems to have been unusually intense during the period in which the first two quartos of Hamlet appeared. Richard Dutton notes that in 1597 the Privy Council began to monitor drama with increased vigilance, often becoming directly involved in issues ordinarily handled by the Master of the Revels. Robert Cecil, who was actively involved in suppressing the discussion of predestination and was responsible for orchestrating the transition of power from Elizabeth to James, directly intervened in the investigation of Samuel Daniel's Philotas in 1604. Ben Jonson was required to appear before the Privy Council for Sejanus, and Dutton speculates that this summons may have resulted not from the acting of the play in 1603 but from its printing in 1605 (109-10 and 164-65). The political atmosphere suggested by these incidents may thus be seen as unfavorable to the inclusion of "predestinate" in the Second Quarto of Hamlet, published in 1604. David Ward has recently argued that the publication of Q2 might have been a "pointed intervention" by Shakespeare's company in the political situation created for the company by James's accession. He suggests that Q2 is a text in some ways tailored to the interests and views of the new king, who had recently become the patron of Shakespeare's company and whose works were being published voluminously in London. Ward's hypothesis is relevant here, since James's opposition to radical Protestantism and to any justification for revenge against a royal figure might have made Q1's reference to "predestinate prudence" unacceptable; see Ward's "The King and Hamlet," SQ 43 (1992): 280-302.


Critical Essays: Hamlet and the Scottish Succession

Hamlet and the Scottish Succession?

See also Hamlet Criticism (Volume 35), and Volumes 37, 44, 71, 82.

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Surveying earlier topical interpretations of Tudor drama, David Bevington observed in 1968 that "Hamlet offers a rich field for topicality … and reveals perhaps most clearly the basic error of the lockpicking sleuth." Among the theories that were no longer "given serious attention" was Lilian Winstanley's, in "Hamlet and the Scottish Succession, published in 1921. Winstanley maintained that Hamlet employed "historical analogues" that were "important, numerous, detailed and undeniable" in an effort "to excite as much sympathy as possible for the Essex conspirators, and for the Scottish succession." Indeed, Winstanley explicitly identified Hamlet with Essex-and King James VI of Scotland.1

Since Bevington's Tudor Drama and Politics appeared twenty-five years ago, historical criticism of Shakespeare and Renaissance Drama has undergone a transformation and revitalization; as Leah Marcus has observed of the 1980s, "historicism is nearly everywhere." But despite the advent of the "New Historicism,"2 many critics remain uneasy about topicality in Shakespeare: as Marcus points out, "even for Renaissance specialists it carries a faint but distinct odor of disreputability."3 Critics interested in Shakespearean topicality today must attempt to reconstruct what Marcus terms the "local" dimensions of the plays in ways that will inform, rather than determine (or supplant), interpretation.

I would like to suggest that Winstanley's title, though not her thesis, deserves reconsideration. As I will argue, the late Elizabethan succession question—specifically the anticipation that James VI of Scotland might succeed the aging Elizabeth—figures importantly in Hamlet. An awareness of English politics with regard to the succession can help us better comprehend the play, particularly the threat from abroad as personified in Young Fortinbras, and, more generally, the unhealthy political cli-mate of Denmark, which extends beyond the corruption of Claudius.

One could begin at the beginning, on the ramparts out-side Elsinore, where a jittery watch is unsure about what the feverish preparations for war portend. I would like to begin instead at the end, with Hamlet's death and the arrival of Fortinbras, returning from Poland at the head of a conquering army. With his last words Hamlet prophesies that "th'election lights / On Fortinbras. He has my dying voice" (V.ii.360-61).4 And Fortinbras, upon viewing the dismal sight, asserts his claim to the Danish throne:

        For me, with sorrow I embrace my fortune.  
        I have some rights of memory in this kingdom,  
        Which now to claim my vantage doth invite me.  
          (V.ii.393-95)

Let us imagine for a moment that the story—if not the play—continues: that Fortinbras succeeds Claudius on the Danish throne, that, indeed, he reigns in peace for over twenty years, during which the memory of the circumstances surrounding his accession grows successively dimmer. And let us imagine that what might be called the Age of Fortinbras has now receded some four hundred years into the past. How difficult would it then be for later students to reconstruct the end of the preceding reign, especially the uncertain atmosphere that surrounded the anticipation of the succession?

What I mean to suggest, of course, is that our knowledge of James I's peaceful accession to the English throne, and the subsequent course of British history, makes it difficult for us to imagine how the prospect of Elizabeth's death and the anticipation of her successor would have appeared to her subjects near the end of the reign—in the period 1599-1601, at the time Hamlet was written and first performed.5

I

The peaceful accession of James VI of Scotland in 1603 may have an air of inevitability when seen in retrospect that it could not have had at the time. Indeed, almost to the end James's prospects of succession were anything but certain. What J. Hurstfield calls "the succession struggle" is an extremely complicated
story, only part of which need concern us here. Briefly, although James had what many regarded to be the strongest hereditary claim to the English crown, as a foreigner he faced a common law prohibition against alien land inheritance in England. And there were at various points a number of rival claimants, perhaps a dozen, including four other principal ones: Lady Arabella Stuart, Catherine Grey, the Earl of Derby, and Philip II of Spain (or his daughter, the Infanta), each of whom could trace his or her descent to Henry VII. Three of them “received the particular attention of the succession speculators and the chanceries of Europe”: James, Arabella, and the Infanta. As Thomas Wilson observed around 1600, “this crown is not like to fall to the ground for want of heads that claim to wear it.” Of the claimants, he was confident James would succeed, “as very many Englishmen do know assuredly.”

Nevertheless, the succession remained in doubt virtually until the moment of Elizabeth's death, and the uncertainty caused considerable anxiety: many of her subjects “genuinely feared that chaos would ensue when Elizabeth died.” This uncertainty was exacerbated by Elizabeth's refusal to declare a successor. James's quiet accession was largely engineered by Elizabeth's chief minister, Robert Cecil, who had been working discreetly to this end for a number of years. In a secret correspondence with James beginning in 1601, in which he offered assurances of support, Cecil counseled James to be patient and to say or do nothing that might alienate Elizabeth or alarm her subjects.

Throughout her long reign, Elizabeth had been unwilling to name a successor or even to allow the subject to be discussed. Towards the end of the reign, as Thomas Wilson noted at the time, speculation about the succession was "to all English capitally forbidden." While Elizabeth's unwillingness to settle the succession had been a matter of concern earlier in the reign, the issue became increasingly acute towards the end of the century, with the childless queen's age—she would turn sixty-seven in 1600—an obvious consideration. As Hurstfield observes, there were good reasons for a "policy of refusing to acknowledge a successor" when the strongest claimant was James's mother, Mary Queen of Scots, who was not only a foreigner but a Catholic: "To have acknowledged [Mary] might well have prompted rebellion on behalf of an English candidate against a Catholic Scot." But even after Mary's execution in 1587, Elizabeth still refused to name a successor. This was, as Hurstfield observes, "a dangerous policy," since James, the best-positioned of the claimants, might be tempted to try to seize the crown by force instead of waiting hopefully for a prospect that was not entirely certain.

Indeed, this danger was almost realized. As Helen Georgia Stafford writes, in pursuit of "the coveted prize" of the English succession James entered upon a frenzy of preparation. He had semi-official agents on the continent, seemed in touch with factions in England, and directed propaganda in Scotland. At the end of 1599 he was busy with a plan to equip his subjects with arms and armor in case of need on the great day. A "band" circulated among his nobility to insure their support for the occasion. Books were printed in defense of his title. Ambassadors were being sent abroad and received in Scotland in a fashion that implied much.

In seeking support in England and, especially, in a great many European capitals, James pursued a diplomatic policy that was in D.H. Willson's unsympathetic phrase "tortuous, secretive and dishonest." Posing "in Britain and in northern Europe as the Protestant heir to England," James sought "at the same time to commend himself secretly to Catholic powers." However, due to both his own weakness and Elizabeth's opposition, his efforts produced few concrete results. James also began a secret intrigue with the rebel Tyrone, in Ireland, and sought to cultivate both Catholics and Puritans in England.

Crucially, James became involved in the intrigues of the "brilliant but unstable" Essex, Elizabeth's favorite, "whose rivalry with Cecil was dividing the English court." Apparently James hoped that an ascendant Essex might help "force from Elizabeth a recognition" of his title. Early in 1600, under Essex's influence, James
had encouraged the Scottish nobility to make preparations to ensure his succession. James urged his nobles to join together for the preservation of his person, and the pursuit of his right to the crowns of England and Ireland. … He also solicited from his Parliament … a liberal grant for warlike purposes in reference to the succession. "He was not certain," he told them, "how soon he should have to use arms; but whenever it should be, he knew his right, and would venture crown and all for it."  

Nothing of substance came of this association of Scottish nobles, which "attracted little attention in England, although well enough known." John Chamberlain reported at the time that "The Scottish nobilitie find themselves greeved that theyre kinge is no more respected, and have lately made an association among themselves against all those that shall hinder his right and succession."  

As Essex's situation was becoming more critical in the year or so before the failed rising of February 1601, his followers appealed to James to intervene militarily in England. James was assured that he would be "declared and acknowledged the certain and undoubted successor to this crown." Essex reportedly carried the king's response, in cipher, in a purse around his neck and burned it before surrendering. Generally aware of James's dealings with Essex, Elizabeth never allowed them to become public at Essex's trial, apparently because she was unwilling de-spite James's conduct to allow his claim to the throne to be jeopardized.  

After the fall of Essex, in early 1601, James eagerly welcomed the overtures of Essex's former rival, Robert Cecil, who was concerned in the secret correspondence he initiated "to ensure that James was never again tempted to seize power before his time." Assured of support at the highest levels of the English government, James "began to sing a different tune. 'Yea, what a foolish part were that in me,' he wrote, 'if I might do it to hazard my honour, state and person, in entering that kingdom by violence as an usurper.'"  

What we need to remind ourselves, after four hundred years, is that at the time Hamlet was written James's newly conciliatory and nonthreatening attitude towards his rights to the throne, like the peaceful succession itself, lay in the future. What was well known in England at the time was that James, who had been actively cultivating support for his claims in England and across Europe, might be tempted to assert his rights by force. Not surprisingly, inflammatory rumors of Scottish war preparations circulated in England. Often mere was thought to be a Danish connection, since it was assumed (and reported) that James's claims would be supported by his brother-in-law, Christian IV of Denmark. We may be tempted to dismiss some of these rumors as fantastic, especially those that involved the Spanish Infanta or the French king Henri IV, but even if grossly exaggerated their effect on the population—and on the political climate (as distinct from the diplomatic or military reality)—could be powerful. In August 1599, for example, Cecil learned of a possible Spanish plot to install James from a writer who felt it his duty to advertise you of the strange rumours and abundance of news spread abroad in the city, and so flying into the country, as there cannot be laid a more dangerous plot to amaze and discourage our people, and to advance the strength and mighty power of the Spaniard, working doubts in the better sort, fear in the poorer sort, and a great distraction in all, in performance of their service.  

According to the writer, the Spanish were said to be preparing a huge armada, carrying 50,000 soldiers, supported by 100 ships from Denmark. It was reported "that the King of Scots is in arms with 40,000 men to invade England, and the Spaniard comes to settle the King of Scots in this realm." The rumor "is so creditably bruited as a preacher, in his prayer before his sermon, prayed to be delivered from the mighty forces of the Spaniard, the Scots and the Danes." A month earlier, Coke sent Cecil an account of the interrogation of one
Weyman, an Essex supporter, who provided "(amongst much refuse) many things worthy of your observation," including testimony that seemed to "as much prognosticate a mathematical conquest (which yet may be imagined) as mustering, making of armour, expectation of forces from Denmark, hope of and from Ireland, &c." Early that year, Cecil had apparently shown his brother Thomas, Lord Burghley a report of a Scottish-Spanish design, which the latter rejected as based "upon false grounds and malicious" despite "the malice of Spain," because "Scotland hath neither a good purse nor a good argument to make her hateful unto England." The Calendar of State Papers, Domestic Series contains accounts of a fascinating series of letters, dating from April 1598 through early 1601, from one John Petit in Flanders, often writing under the alias J.B., to Peter Halins (alias Thomas Phelippes) in London, conveying news of rumored designs against England. In them the Scottish king figures prominently. On 22 April 1598 [n.s.], Petit wrote from Antwerp that James was "hastening himself in making friends to attain the Crown of England, and for that purpose sends out many ambassadors." Petit went on to say, "I hope Her Majesty may live many years, and prevent the intentions which all Scots in these parts affirm he has, of attempting it in her lifetime; but she should look well about her." In June 1598 Petit reported from Antwerp:

If I were not acquainted with Scottish brags, I might believe England was already more than half theirs. They say that the King of Denmark's brother ... is to bring men from Denmark to do wonders in England; that the Queen having promised the King of Scots, at his marriage with the Dane [Anne of Denmark], to declare him her successor, she must perform it; ... [and that] the house of Lorraine and other princes have promised assistance.

Petit evidently felt that there must have been some foundation for these rumors ("So great a smoke cannot be without some fire"), but he judged that in relying upon France James would be "deceived," because "the French will never help to join Scotland and England; they would rather divide both into more kingdoms." By the end of the year, Petit was reporting (from London), "I am told that in making war for the Crown, the King of Scots builds more on means within England than abroad, and has a great party, especially of Puritans. If he can get money from abroad, he will not wait till the fruit be ready to fall."

From Antwerp in the spring of 1599, Petit reported news out of Scotland that "the King intends to gather grapes before they are ripe, and his brother of Denmark will assist him with 10,000 men." There were rumors that "for a kingdom" James would "become a counterfeit Catholic, like the King of France." "The Scots here are in great hopes, but all they say need not be believed," Petit wrote, concluding that "Means should be taken to prevent that King cutting the grass under Her Majesty's feet." A month later Petit wrote again, from Liege, that James "would attempt to gather fruit before it is ripe, but cannot find friends to assist him; the French King will not ... and the Scottish nobility do not desire to see him King of England." Again, less than six weeks later, Petit wrote from Liege, "A Scot at the Spa said that his King had a promise from the Queen to succeed her; that if she perform it not, he has made many friends, both in England and abroad, especially in Denmark, and has no doubt of carrying it; and that he would undoubtedly be a Catholic, or give the liberty of religion which he has promised."

In August 1599, Petit complained from Brussels that his letters were being opened and the contents conveyed to James. He went on to enumerate the arguments against those in England that "will not believe that the King of Scots intends to cut the grass under Her Majesty's feet." Citing "public speeches" by "the King and many in their Parliament ... to stir the people to contribute largely to revenge his mother's death, and force Her Majesty to declare him heir apparent," and "many sendings between England and Scotland ... to excuse this," Petit noted considerable activity across the Continent in Denmark, Germany, Rome, Spain, Brussels, and Paris, and concluded that the members of Elizabeth's Council who would "not believe known truths" were favorers of the Scot who "will not believe what they see, and want Her Majesty to wink at it, that her enemy may fortify himself." Petit went on to relay the rumor that "some English and French have put it into the head..."
of the King of France … to take England himself." The English at Brussels were reportedly "in factions for and against the Scot, and I hear it is the same at Court," where Cecil and the Lord Admiral "are said to be chief of the Scottish faction." And Petit reported that the Scots "brag of many more friends among the nobility and commons, and that London is wholly theirs, with all the Puritans in England."35 In October 1599 Petit reported, "Rumours fly that the King of Scots is preparing to war against England, and that his brother-in-law of Denmark has broken the ice already."36 Similar reports were dispatched the following month—and throughout 1600.37

Petit's letters may in some measure represent the obsessions of a single individual, but their confused minglings of fact and rumor, tinged with apprehension, suggest something of the climate of uncertainty and fear surrounding the succession issue. And fearfulness about the succession "was linked to a number of other anxieties, concerning sedition, aristocratic factionalism, popular rebellion, and foreign invasion."38 It is against this background, and the many reports of diplomatic intrigue and possible military action in behalf of James's efforts to assure his succession, that I propose we look at Hamlet.

II

Let us return to Fortinbras and his reappearance at Elsinore in arms at the end of the play. As Eleanor Prosser observes, Fortinbras "reenters Denmark like a conquering hero." Firing off a volley to greet the English ambassadors, he acts "not like a privileged guest in Denmark but like its sovereign." Even before learning that his election has received Hamlet's blessing, Fortinbras calls a council of the Danish nobility and asserts his claim to the throne.39 Horatio's attitude towards Fortinbras reinforces this view. Specifically charged by Hamlet with telling Fortinbras that he has Hamlet's "dying voice" for the succession (V.ii.361-62), Horatio appears to concede Fortinbras's authority:

\[
\text{give order that these bodies} \\
\text{High on a stage be placed to the view,} \\
\text{And let me speak to th'yet unknowing world} \\
\text{How these things came about.} \\
\text{(V.ii.382-85)}
\]

But before Horatio reveals that he intends to address the succession issue, Fortinbras takes the initiative and asserts his "rights … in this kingdom"; Horatio merely adds,

\[
\text{Of that I shall have also cause to speak,} \\
\text{And from his mouth whose voice will draw on more.} \\
\text{(V.ii.396-97)}
\]

Fortinbras's self-assurance is unmistakable in his next speech, the last in the play, when he gives a series of commands for bearing off the bodies.

Although Fortinbras has been frequently seen as the embodiment of a "restoration of order" at the end of the play,41 he is in many respects a problematic figure. As Prosser notes, he is "a foreign adventurer," anything but a representative of "the rule of reason and integrity."42 And, in Paul Cantor's words, despite courage, which Hamlet admires, he is "presented as a trouble-maker; his own uncle does everything he can to keep him out of Norway and direct his spiritedness against Poland." To Cantor, Fortinbras is a "dubious" choice: Hamlet "seems in fact to undo everything his father was said to have accomplished." Indeed, "the prospect of Denmark falling into Norwegian hands should increase our sense of hollowness and futility at the end."43
A troubling figure, Fortinbras returns to Denmark in circumstances that are themselves deeply unsettling. The stage is strewn with bodies, of course, when he appears at the head of his army and begins to take charge. That Horatio is ill at ease should hardly be surprising, given the scene he has just witnessed. Yet it seems odd that in urging haste so he can relate Hamlet's story he seems primarily concerned with the dangers of an unsettled populace.\textsuperscript{44} He asks that the disposition of the bodies

\begin{verbatim}
be presently perform'd
Even while men's minds are wild, lest more
mischance
On plots and errors happen.
\end{verbatim}

(V.ii.398-400)

Horatio's focus at this moment on the future stability of Denmark may seem all the more perplexing given his previous lack of political ambition or interest. A moment before, declaring himself to be "more an antique Roman than a Dane" (V.ii.346), he had attempted to kill himself. And it is difficult to imagine what "more mischance" might happen; as Fortinbras observes, death has already struck "so many princes at a shot" (V.ii.371-72).\textsuperscript{45}

The apprehension Horatio voices about the instability of "men's minds" can best be understood in the context of a recurring concern throughout the play with popular unrest, an anxiety known to many in the play's original audiences,\textsuperscript{46} especially as it relates to the succession. As E.A.J. Honigmann observes, \textit{Hamlet} continually alludes to, and even depicts, "the distraction of the multitude."\textsuperscript{47} Most striking foments to avenge his father's death: overbearing Claudius's officers "in a riotous head," Laertes leads his followers into the very presence of the king. According to the report of an unnamed messenger,

\begin{verbatim}
The rabble call him lord,
And, as the world were now but to begin,
Antiquity forgot, custom not known—,
The ratifiers and props of every word—
They cry, "Choose we! Laertes shall be king."
Caps, hands, and tongues applaud it to the clouds,
"Laertes shall be king, Laertes king."
\end{verbatim}

(IV.v. 102-108)

Although Claudius manages to avoid danger, co-opting Laertes and redirecting his anger at Hamlet, the threat is real: both the king's life and crown are at risk. So are the principles of antiquity and custom that sustain the crown and its wearer (illegitimately, in the case of Claudius). The Danish monarchy may be elective, but Denmark is not a democracy, and this brief assertion of popular will is as treasonous as it would be in Elizabethan England. A Fortinbras might have seized the opportunity-Claudius's "Switzers," the foreign mercenaries of the palace guard, have been swept aside-but Laertes seems interested only in personal revenge, which Claudius is able to manipulate for his own ends. Nevertheless, Claudius's vulnerability is evident.

Apprehension of such an event has been palpable at the court at least since Hamlet mistakenly stabbed Polonius. Claudius's first reaction upon learning of Polonius's death was to fear for his own safety: "O heavy deed! / It had been so with us had we been there" (IV.i.12-13). But he immediately focuses on the more abstract danger in the likelihood that he will be blamed: "Alas, how shall this bloody deed be answer'd? / It will be laid to us"; and he goes on to say,

\begin{verbatim}
this vile deed
We must with all our majesty and skill
\end{verbatim}
Both countenance and excuse.
(IV.i.16-17, 30-32)

It is not clear where Claudius most perceives a danger: from the populace, the Council, or Laertes. But it is clear that he feels compelled to try to avoid the appearance of responsibility. He does so, just as he sought the support of his Council for his hasty marriage, by gathering his "wisest friends" for consultation, to "let them know both what we mean to do / And what's untimely done." His aim is to keep "slander" from himself, so it "may miss our name / And hit the woundless air" (IV.i.38-44). Claudius's strategy fails, however: despite his efforts, the people become

muddied,
Thick and unwholesome in their thoughts and
whispers
For good Polonius' death,

and Claudius realizes that he has "done but greenly / In hugger-mugger to inter him" (IV.v.81-84). And Claudius's anxiety about appearances leaves him vulnerable to Laertes, who concludes from Polonius's "means of death" and "obscure funeral" that Claudius must have been responsible (IV.v.210).

The dissatisfaction of the people is a source of considerable anxiety at court; Claudius is particularly nervous about how it may affect Laertes, who

wants not buzzers to infect his ear
With pestilent speeches of his father's death,
Wherein necessity, of matter beggar'd,
Will nothing stick our person to arraign
In ear and ear.

(IV.v.90-94)

The play never depicts the sort of opposition Claudius imagines, which seems to be a mirror image of the rumormongering and conspiracy we associate with Polonius and the court. Indeed, except for Hamlet and the "rabble" that accompany Laertes (who disappear as abruptly as they burst into the royal presence), Claudius seems remarkably unburdened by domestic opposition, either open or clandestine. His seemingly unfounded fears reinforce the impression of weakness evident from his initial preoccupation with what he imagines to be Fortinbras's "weak supposai of our worth" (I.ii.18).

The "rabble" who follow Laertes against the king may recall Fortinbras's supporters, the "lawless resolutes" he "Shark'd up" to recover the lands his father lost to Old Hamlet (I.i.101, 105-107).

In both cases, the dangers to Denmark are seen as serious. The threat posed by Fortinbras and his followers is said to explain the extraordinary defensive preparations that open the play: the "strict and most observant watch" every night, the "daily cast of brazen cannon / And foreign mart for implements of war," the "impress of shipwrights" working without respite (I.i.73-79). Again, Fortinbras's threat is

The source of this our watch, and the chief head
Of this post-haste and rummage in the land.

(I.i. 109-10)

These hurried preparations in the face of a military threat provide the larger context in which the ghost of Old Hamlet appears to the frightened watch, wearing "the very armour he had on / When he th'ambitious Norway combated" (I.i.63-64). (Presumably, Old Hamlet was not so armed when murdered sleeping in his garden.)
The sight is ominous: to Horatio it "bodes some strange eruption to our state" (I.i.72); when the ghost reappears, Marcellus concludes that "Something is rotten in the state of Denmark" (I.iv.90). Both Horatio and Marcellus interpret the ghost's appearance in political terms, as a sign that the state is troubled. Between the ghost's appearances, the scene shifts to court, the source of the trouble.

With unconscious irony, King Claudius opens his speech to the court by evoking the "green" memory of Old Hamlet's death. The contrast between the old king and his successor is striking; Claudius is in every way a fallingoff. Where Old Hamlet commanded his subjects' affection along with their allegiance, so that his exploits of thirty years earlier are still discussed, Claudius's hold on the crown is not secure. Claudius's kingship depends, as he is well aware, on the support or at least acquiescence of the Danish nobility and commons, hence his elaborate concern in his opening speech to underscore the support of his Council for his hasty marriage to his dead brother's queen:

Nor have we herein barr'd
Your better wisdoms, which have freely gone
With this affair along. For all, our thanks.
(I.ii.14-16)

It is in this larger political context that Claudius's apprehensions about Hamlet must be understood. Hamlet's unwillingness in the first court scene to forego his mourning and accept Claudius's clumsy and disingenuous efforts at reconciliation merely complicates a situation that would exist regardless: Hamlet is not only a potential private avenger of a murdered father, as Laertes will be, but a public figure whose very existence poses a challenge to Claudius's kingship. "Hamlet, Prince of Denmark," as he is called on all the early title pages, calls himself "Hamlet the Dane" when he jumps into Ophelia's grave after Laertes (V.i.251). Although Claudius seems to have attained election to the throne legitimately, Hamlet is old enough to have succeeded his father. As important, he is accomplished, as both Ophelia and Fortinbras testify: he has "The courtier's, soldier's, scholar's, eye, tongue, sword" (III.i.153), and "he was likely, had he been put on / To have prov'd most royal" (V.ii.402-403).

Further, Hamlet is popular, as Claudius constantly worries. As he will tell Laertes, Claudius feared to move openly against Hamlet because of Gertrude's doting and because of "the great love the general gender bear him" (IV.vii.18). If Laertes, in pursuit of his private grievance, could rally such support, how might Hamlet have challenged Claudius's hold on power if he had wished?

Claudius is usually taken to be the source of Denmark's ills, and with good reason: he commits the ultimate political sin of regicide, and his efforts to keep the crown lead directly or indirectly to the tragedies that engulf the court and country. Claudius is responsible for the treachery that kills Hamlet, along with Gertrude, Laertes, and Claudius himself. Their service to Claudius results in the deaths of both Polonius and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Even Ophelia's distraction and drowning follow directly from Hamlet's apparent madness and her father's death.

But Claudius's responsibility has definite limits. While it is not possible to measure precisely the influence of his sins on the behavior of his followers, especially the corrupting influence of the royal murder—of which his creatures are, like Gertrude, presumably innocent—the case of Polonius suggests the limits of Claudius's influence. Polonius appears to be the creature of a novice king who himself acknowledges, in seeking to solidify the support of his Council, that Young Fortinbras holds "a weak supposai of [his] worth" (I.ii.18). But Polonius is also, paradoxically, an experienced minister, whose brain has long hunted "the trail of policy" (II.ii.47). However we may view Polonius's political instincts—he is incapable of discerning the real causes of Hamlet's apparent madness, and he spies on his own son by initiating harmful rumors about his character—it is clear that unlike Osric or, arguably, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, Polonius reached political maturity before Claudius murdered Old Hamlet and assumed his crown. Thus, whether or not we can easily imagine

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Polonius holding sway at the court of Old Hamlet, we cannot trace his political and ethical conduct directly to Claudius and the murder of his royal brother.

When Hamlet mistakenly kills Polonius, having taken him for Claudius hiding behind the arras, Hamlet maintains that Polonius must bear responsibility for his own conduct: he is a "wretched, rash, intruding fool" who deserves his "fortune" for having been "too busy" (III.iv.31-33). Similarly, Hamlet justifies the deliberate deaths of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, whom he could as easily have spared, on the grounds that they "did make love to this employment," which ironically kills them instead of the intended victim:

They are not near my conscience, their defeat
Does by their own insinuation grow.
(V.ii.57-59)

The point, for Hamlet, is that these political creatures are free to make other choices.

As Hamlet is aware, there is something inherently corrupting in the relationship between a king and his courtiers. Hamlet's barbs at Rosencrantz and Guildenstern reveal that he is aware of their ambition; like them, he slyly suggests, he has an aspiring mind. As Polonius jumped to the conclusion that his daughter was the source of Hamlet's distemper, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern may conclude, at Hamlet's suggestion, that Hamlet is distraught because he "lack[es] advancement" (III.ii.331). To Rosencrantz this is incomprehensible, since Hamlet has "the voice of the King himself for [his] succession in Denmark" (III.ii.332-33). Their advancement depends on serving the king in whatever way he commands, which includes their efforts to play upon Hamlet, as he says, like a pipe.

The courtiers who so disgust Hamlet operate in a climate of corruption that pervades Denmark, where Hamlet is aware that "one may smile, and smile, and be a villain" (I.v.109). It is important to note, however, that as rotten as Denmark is, a similar atmosphere envelops other countries, where there has been no sin of regicide. Norway, governed by a decrepit old man, cannot contain the spirit of Young Fortinbras, who does not feel bound by the legality of his father's forfeiture of lands or by the value of the ground he seeks to win, at terrible human cost, from the Poles. And England, Denmark's tributary, can be counted upon to fulfill Claudius's request for the immediate execution of Prince Hamlet. The climate of corruption at the Danish court—the spying, conspiracy, hypocrisy, and ambition of courtiers like Polonius, Rosen-crantz and Guildenstern, and Osric—should be seen within this larger international context. The political evils depicted in Hamlet cannot all be traced to the sins of Claudius.

The international dimension is crucial for an appreciation of the politics of Hamlet, particularly when considered in the context of the uneasiness surrounding the late Elizabethan succession question. As I have suggested, the political world of the play is informed by the uncertainty engendered by James VI's maneuvers and threats to secure the English succession. This is not to say that there are specific correspondences, that the militaristic Fortinbras is meant to represent James VI on stage. (Nor is Denmark Scotland, as Winstanley maintained, or Hamlet Essex—and James.) It is not in such a literal sense that Hamlet may be thought to have held "as 'twere the mirror up to nature" (III.ii.22).

Rather, an awareness of the Elizabethan political scene can serve the task of interpretation by reminding us of the immediacy with which a contemporary audience might have perceived the anxious war preparations of the opening scene, with its rumors and apprehensions; the highly charged political atmosphere throughout the play; and the public dimensions of Hamlet's plight. Unlike some modern readers, Shakespeare's audience would have been unlikely to see in Hamlet's story merely a private tragedy or in Fortinbras's succession to the Danish throne a welcome and unproblematic restoration of order.

Notes
Much has been written recently about the "New Historicism” movement in English Renaissance studies, especially about the ideologies and methodologies evident in the work of its diverse practitioners. The historical orientation of the "New Historicism,” as it has been practiced by Stephen Greenblatt and critics influenced by him, has been called into question recently by a historian who finds the term "a misnomer, for the method has little to do with historicism of any sort," though he "often admire[s] and approve[s] of New Historist work." According to this view, "'New Historicism’ is a text-based form of close reading that relies upon essentially arbitrary comparisons with other texts " (emphasis in original). See Robert D. Hume, "Texts Within Contexts: Notes Toward a Historical Method," PQ 71, 1 (Winter 1992): 69-100, 71.


Quotations throughout are from the New Arden edition of Harold Jenkins (London: Methuen, 1982); citations are given parenthetically.

Although we cannot be absolutely certain about Hamlet's date, I follow the dating in the New Arden edition: the play "belongs to 1601," Jenkins concludes, but "the essential Hamlet, minus the passage on the troubles of the actors … was being acted on the stage just possibly even before the end of 1599 and certainly in the course of 1600" (p. 13).


Hurstfield, pp. 372-73.

Quoted in Hurstfield, p. 373.

Maurice Lee, Jr., Great Britain's Solomon: James VI and I in His Three Kingdoms (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1990), p. 106. After James's peaceful succession the mood was generally euphoric. Sir George Carew reported, "All men are exceedingly satisfied and praise God who of His goodness hath so miraculously provided for us, contrary to the opinions of the wisest, who for many years past trembled to think of her Majesty's decease, as if instantly upon it the kingdom would have been torn in sunder." According to Lord Burghley, "The contentment of the people is unspeakable, seeing all things proceed so quietly, whereas they expected in the interim their houses should have been spoiled and sacked" (quoted in Lee, pp. 106-107).

"It is sometimes said that Elizabeth named James as her heir on her deathbed, but firm support is lacking for this view," according to John Guy (Tudor England [Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1990], p. 453). Rejecting the theory that Elizabeth anointed her successor, Guy writes, "On the contrary, James I succeeded because Cecil and Lord Henry Howard had paved the way, because he was the most realistic alternative, and because fifteen nobles and councillors signed the warrant that ordered proclamation of his style" (pp. 453-54). Lee observes that James "worked long and hard to achieve" the English crown, and "for his ultimate triumph he deserves a great deal of the credit" (p. 95).

According to Willson, Elizabeth promised James in 1586 that "she would do nothing to injure any right or title that might be due him, unless his ingratitude provoked her to the contrary; and beyond these words, with their threatening reservation, she would not go"; Willson believes Elizabeth "[undoubtedly] came to regard James's
accession as inevitable" (p. 140).

11 Many sources document the various negotiations for marriage early in the reign and the attempts by Parliament to urge Elizabeth to settle the succession. On efforts to employ drama to advance specific policies and claims see Marie Axton, _The Queen's Two Bodies: Drama and the Elizabethan Succession_ (London: Royal Historical Society, 1977). Bevington notes that from the first Elizabeth "was especially alert to the question of her marriage or establishing a successor to the throne"; however, even late in the reign, and despite her known dislike of talk about the succession, "she still expected … to receive unwelcome advice in her plays" (p. 8).

12 Quoted in Hurstfield, p. 373.

13 Hurstfield, p. 391. Elizabeth may have been "anxious … not to rouse an anti-Scottish faction which might have tried to make things impossible for James—and for Elizabeth." There may also have been a more personal motive, "the understandable personal feelings of an old and popular Queen who hated to see her own shadow lengthen while the sun rose in Scotland" (p. 391). As Lee observes, "The succession to the English crown was the great object of James's life—indeed, an obsession. He would do anything to obtain it, even to the extent of risking the patriotic wrath of his subjects after the execution of his mother" (p. 65).


15 Willson, p. 142; see pp. 142-48. Willson's 1956 biography of James offers a generally negative portrayal, which has been challenged in recent years; as Lee observes, summarizing the changing interpretations of the king's character and ability, Willson's book is "still, alas, the best scholarly biography" (p. xiii).

16 Stafford, p. 124.

17 To observers throughout Europe, James seemed, in Willson's terms, "a kind of irrepressible and erratic bounder whose bizarre diplomacy was crass and uncivilized and whose words and actions offered no basis of confidence" (p. 148). According to Lee, James concluded before the Armada that Elizabeth was unlikely to support any of the English claimants. James waged a "brilliantly successful campaign" to minimize a challenge from foreign, Catholic claimants: he "carried on underhand negotiations with various Continental Catholics, including the Pope, and did so in ways that were so studiously noncommittal, vague, and repudiatable as to raise a great many hopes yet commit him to nothing. … There was no Catholic opposition when the great day came, and in Catholic circles on the Continent there was considerable hope of James's conversion" (p. 99).

18 Essex used the succession issue "to lend an appearance of statesmanship to his wild ambitions and to win the King of Scots" (Willson, pp. 149-50). The exact date of Essex's "first overture to James" on the subject of the succession is uncertain, though it was probably in the period 1597-1599 (P.M. Handover, _The Second Cecil: The Rise to Power, 1563-1604, of Sir Robert Cecil, Later First Earl of Salisbury_ [London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1959], p. 152). Essex and James "had exchanged casual letters" at least since 1588 (G.B. Harrison, _The Life and Death of Robert Devereux, Earl of Essex_ [New York: Holt, 1937], p. 45). Beginning at least in 1598, through a series of secret contacts, Essex evidently sought to reinforce James's Protestant leanings and to counter what he believed was sympathy among some English officials for the claims of the Infanta. James apparently answered the letters, but the correspondence is lost. However, it seems clear that Essex "flirted with treason in his secret correspondence" with James, contemplating in 1599 the use of troops "to oust Cecil and his collaborators from the Privy Council" (Guy, p. 448).
There was speculation that Essex sought the crown for himself; Handover cites Thomas Fitzherbert, a Catholic exile in Madrid, writing in early 1599: "I think … the King of Scots will win the game, if the Earl of Essex be not in his way.' Although the Scots took Essex to be James's 'greatest friend' the writer considered they were deceived, and that Essex 'takes him for his competitor.' That year Essex was cautioned that James had been told that "the only obstacle" to his title was Essex (Handover, pp. 189, 191).

19 John Bruce, ed., Correspondence of King James VI. of Scotland with Sir Robert Cecil and Others in England … , Camden Society o.s., 78 (London, 1861; rpt. New York: AMS, 1968), p. xlv; see also

20 Bruce, p. xlv, n. b.


22 Although the details are unclear, according to Stafford there appears to have been "a fairly close understanding" between James and the Essex camp. In mid-1599, a messenger from an Essex supporter, Lord Mountjoy, sought "to assure the King that Essex had no thought of rivalry and would countenance no heir to the throne but James, and to discuss some course for his recognition as heir in the Queen's lifetime"; this amounted to "a general invitation to James to back the Earl's efforts to oust his rivals from the government of England." James's response was "cautiously encouraging." Then, in early 1600, it was proposed more definitely "that James should prepare an army 'at a convenient time' and declare his purpose" while Mountjoy would bring troops from Ireland. This time the response was "dilatory" (Stafford, pp. 208-209).

23 Stafford, pp. 216-18.

24 Hurstfield, pp. 392, 393. Hurstfield suggests that Cecil also sought to "instruct James" in his future duties as king; for a contrasting view, that James was left in the dark about English affairs, see Lee, pp. 102-103.

25 I owe this emphasis to an anonymous reader, a historian, who observed that these rumors "were grossly exaggerated, given the weak state of Scottish arms and James's reasonable prospect of succeeding peacefully in the near future" (reader's report).

26 G. Coppin to Sir Robert Cecil, 9 August 1599, Calendar of the Manuscripts of the Most Hon. the Marquis of Salisbury, K.G. … , Historical Manuscripts Commission Reports (London: His Majesty's Stationery Office, 1902), 9:282-83, henceforth HMC Salisbury. I wish to thank James S. Shapiro of Columbia University for calling my attention to this letter.


30 14 June 1598 [n.s.], CSP Domestic, p. 59. In Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare, vol. 7, Geoffrey Bullough reprints a portion of this letter under the heading "Probable Historical Allusions" in Hamlet; the Danish prince was rumored to intend to "demand a certain old payment which England was accustomed to give Denmark" (London: Routledge; New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1973), p. 185.

31 2 December 1598, CSP Domestic, p. 128.
32 8 May 1599 [n.s.], CSP Domestic, p. 189.
33 9 June 1599 [n.s.], CSP Domestic, p. 201.
34 18 July 1599 [n.s.], CSP Domestic, p. 243.
35 28 August 1599 [n.s.], CSP Domestic, pp. 298-99.
36 11 October 1599 [n.s.], CSP Domestic, p. 327.
37 CSP Domestic, p. 343, passim.
38 The larger implications of the succession fears are stressed by the anonymous reader cited above, who observes, "There were many reasons to worry about the political stability of England at the time Hamlet was produced, but the danger of a disputed succession provided a focus for all of them, since an unsettled succession provided a potential opening for every other form of rebellion, sedition, and conspiracy" (reader's report).
40 On Horatio's deference to Fortinbras, the text is ambiguous. He has just addressed Fortinbras and the English ambassadors together, and it is possible that he continues to address them jointly:

    since. …
    You from the Polack wars and you from
    England
    Are here arriv'd, give order that these bodies
    High on a stage be placed to the view.
    (V.ii.380-82)

On the other hand, Fortinbras is addressed first, despite Horatio's having just responded to the ambassadors. If Horatio concedes Fortinbras's authority, the cause may be less in Fortinbras's assuming command than in Hamlet's having just explicitly endorsed him.
42 Prosser, pp. 239, 240. Questioning the "critical commonplace that Shakespeare always reestablishes order at the end of his tragedies," Prosser writes, "Order of a sort is always established, but is the audience necessarily to rejoice that the commonwealth has been healed?" (p. 240, n. 38). At the end of Hamlet, "A strong man has taken over" (p. 240).
43 Paul A. Cantor, Shakespeare, "Hamlet," Landmarks of World Literature (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1989), pp. 61, 62-63. An extreme view of Fortinbras is expressed by Arthur McGee, who identifies him with the devil: "puffed with 'divine ambition," he has "rebelled against his king … He is clad in armour like the Ghost at the beginning of the play—he not only acts like Satan, he looks like him. Elizabethans would have had no difficulty in seeing the parallel" (The Elizabethan Hamlet [New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1987], p. 173).
44 In his eagerness to assume control, Fortinbras had also urged haste: "Let us haste to hear it" (V.ii.391).
Whatever the merits of Fortinbras's "rights" in Denmark, no credible Danish rival is left alive at the end of the play to claim the throne.

Fear of unrest seems to have been pervasive throughout the period in England, according to most historical accounts; however, Steve Rappaport challenges the assumption that sixteenth-century London was marked by "chronic instability" and observes that "Not once did the capital experience a popular rising aimed at overthrowing the government or otherwise overthrowing the established social order" (Worlds within Worlds: Structures of Life in Sixteenth-Century London, Cambridge Studies in Population, Economy and Society in Past Time 7 [Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1989], pp. 6, 18).


The uneasiness of the populace is also a factor in the court's response to Ophelia's madness. When she asks to see Gertrude, the reluctant queen is urged to admit her lest Ophelia's plight inflame discontented subjects, who

aim at it,
And botch the words up fit to their own
thoughts:
'Twere good she were spoken with, for she may
strew
Dangerous conjectures in ill-breeding minds.

(IV.v.9-15)

Exactly what these conjectures might be remains unclear, but they are evidently related to the muddy and unwholesome whispers about Polonius's death.

In urging that we remain aware of the cumulative threat of lawless bands challenging Claudius's rule, I do not mean to identify Laertes's followers with Fortinbras's, as Harold Jenkins does. Noting that as the play proceeds Fortinbras is seen leading not a group of "lawless resolutes" but a well-disciplined army, Jenkins concludes that the "'lawless resolutes' … have attached themselves to Laertes" (p. 100). Such a conclusion seems unsupported by the explicitly Norwegian character of Fortinbras's followers: he gathered them "in the skirts of Norway here and there" (I.i.100), making his "levies," "lists," and "full proportion … / Out of [Old Norway's] subject" (I.ii.31-33); and these are the same soldiers who march across Danish soil to attack Poland (II.ii.74-75), returning at the end of the play. Laertes's followers must have been Danish, given the secrecy and apparent haste of his return from France after Polonius's death (IV.v.88).

The ghost's military costume and bearing are repeatedly emphasized: he appears in

that fair and warlike form
In which the majesty of buried Denmark
Did sometimes march,

and he appears three times before the watch "With martial stalk" (I.i.50-52, 69). See I.i.1 12-13, where "this portentous figure / Comes armed through our watch."

When the ghost appears to Hamlet in Gertrude's closet, according to Q1 he does so "in his night gowne" (III.iv.103 s.d. t.n.), though Hamlet observes later in the scene that he appears "in his habit as he liv'd" (III.iv.137).
Claudius's chief followers are explicitly identified as his Council in Q2 o.s.d. (Jenkins, p. 178, S.D. t.n.).

Jenkins, p. 165, *Title* t.n.

There has been extensive critical discussion of the elective nature of the Danish monarchy and its relationship to England, which will not be reviewed here (see, e.g., Honigmann and John Dover Wilson, *What Happens in "Hamlet, "* 3rd edn. [Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1951; rprt. 1962]; Cay Dollerup, *Denmark, "Hamlet, " and Shakespeare: A Study of Englishmen's Knowledge of Denmark towards the End of the Sixteenth Century with Special Reference to "Hamlet, "* Elizabethan and Renaissance Studies 47, 2 vols. [Salzburg: Institut für Englische Sprache und Literatur, 1975]; and Gunnar Sjogren, *Hamlet the Dane*, Publications of the New Society of Letters at Lund 77 [Lund: Gleer, 1983]). Norway does not provide an exact parallel, since Fortinbras must have been a minor when Old Fortinbras was killed and his brother succeeded him.

As to Claudius's election, it is easy to imagine Claudius working to consolidate his position while Hamlet is at Wittenberg, so that Hamlet returns to Denmark after learning of his father's death to confront a *fait accompli*. At any rate, Hamlet seems to accept the fact of his uncle's election, raising no objection despite the opportunity Claudius provides in publicly declaring him "the most immediate to our throne" (I.i.109), at least until the end of the play, when he charges Claudius (to Horatio) with having "kill'd my king and whor'd my mother [and] / Popp'd in between th'election and my hopes" (V.ii.64-65).

Although Claudius never offers an explanation for forbidding Hamlet's return to Wittenberg after the funeral/wedding, declaring simply that "It is most retrograde to our desire" (I.i.114), his intention of keeping an eye on Hamlet is apparent even before Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are called for. When keeping Hamlet at court becomes too dangerous, Claudius resolves to send him to England (III.i. 169-72). Even after the death of Polonius, Claudius treats Hamlet with caution—while plotting his "present death" when Hamlet reaches England (IV.iii.68):

> How dangerous is it that this man goes loose!
> Yet must not we put the strong law on him:
> He's lov'd of the distracted multitude,
> Who like not in their judgment but their eyes.
> (IV.iii.2-5)

That some courtiers were flexible enough to adapt successfully to the new regime is evident from Hamlet's comment, to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, that "my uncle is King of Denmark, and those that would make mouths at him while my father lived give twenty, forty, fifty, a hundred ducats apiece for his picture in little" (II.ii.359-62). Whether he has Polonius specifically in mind is unclear.

Hamlet is aware, of course, that he too must bear responsibility for his conduct: as he says of Polonius,

> For this same lord
> I do repent; but heaven hath pleas'd it so,
> To punish me with this and this with me.
> (III.iv. 174-76)

In the forged commission, Hamlet could as easily, and safely, have asked that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern be held secretly in England until Denmark sent further word. At the very least, he could have allowed them shriving time.
In both situations, Hamlet judges his victims in similar terms: just as Polonius finds that "to be too busy is some danger," Rosencrantz and Guildenstern find that "'Tis dangerous" to come between the thrusts "Of mighty opposites" (III.iv.33; V.ii.60-62).

Indeed, Hamlet repeatedly—though ironically—exhorts his old school fellows to "deal justly" with him (II.ii.276). And he cautions them about the precariousness of their position: Rosencrantz is a "sponge," soaking up "the King's countenance, his rewards, his authorities," a sponge that will be squeezed dry when the king "needs what you have gleaned" (IV.ii. 11-20).

In the following scene, eagerly accepting Claudius's commission to take Hamlet to England, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern fawningly endorse his concern for his own safety as "Most holy and religious," since so "many many bodies … live and feed upon" him. Upon the king's

weal depends and rests
The lives of many. …

Never alone
Did the King sigh, but with a general groan.

(III.iii.8-23)

Hamlet sees Fortinbras as a salutary contrast: as wasteful and destructive as his campaign against the Poles is likely to be, his "spirit, with divine ambition puff'd, / Makes mouths at the invisible event." Hamlet is encouraged in his task by the example of Fortinbras, whose greatness can find "quarrel in a straw / When honour's at the stake" (IV.iv.49-56).

Winstanley, pp. 7, 180.

Some of the ideas presented in this essay were first aired at an NEH seminar on Shakespeare's Politics directed by Paul A. Cantor at the University of Virginia in 1987. An earlier draft of the essay was discussed at the 1990 Shakespeare Association of America seminar "Shakespeare and the Accession of James I," organized by Arthur F. Kinney (respondent: Steven Mullaney). I am grateful to Professors Cantor and Kinney for their interest and encouragement. As the essay approached publication, it benefitted from the critiques of David Scott Kastan and more than one anonymous reader.


**Critical Essays: Hamlet's Ear**

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An alienation from the hypocrisy of a courtly style or decorum in language afflicts Hamlet from his first appearance in the play. The courtly airs or 'songs', the 'words of so sweet breath', the 'music vows', with which he wooed Ophelia are no longer part of his idiom, although he will briefly redeploy them to disguise his true state of mind. In Act 1 scene 2, we meet a Hamlet whose abrupt retreat from social intercourse is not only signalled by his mourning dress, but is also articulated through an intensely satiric relationship to language. This scathing view of the world is articulated in all of Hamlet's language, in his soliloquies and monologues as well as in his dialogues with others; it finds its most effective form of expression, however, in his use of wordplay. Indeed, before the final tragic catastrophe Hamlet's role as malcontent and revenger succeeds not so much by action as by his disordering, through punning, of social constructions of identity. The centrality of
the pun to the view of earthly mutability and death which Hamlet gradually elaborates in the course of the
play is aptly illustrated by the fact that he puns not only on his own death ('The rest is silence'), but also as he
finally accomplishes his task of revenge and kills Claudius, asking 'Is thy union here?' as he forces him to
drink the wine that Claudius has poisoned with a pearl or 'union'. Yet the chief interest of Hamlet's quibbling
lies not in his semantic puns, which play upon words with two or more meanings, like 'rest' or 'union', but in
his richly suggestive use of homophonic resemblances between words, in order to expand their significance.
Through these linguistic acts of expansion, Hamlet comments upon particular elements of the tragic narrative,
augmenting their apparent meaning by interweaving ostensibly disparate themes and motifs into a complex
unity.

In contrast to the use of wordplay as the supreme instance of a dialogic courtly wit which celebrates the
shared values of an aristocratic group, it is through an ironic use of iteration, and of the pun in particular, that
Hamlet's echoic or quibbling discourse is able to enunciate, albeit obliquely, those hidden meanings which are
concealed within the polite language of the Danish court. Hamlet condemns and rejects that courtly playing
upon him as a phallic pipe or recorder of which he accuses Rosencrantz and Guildenstern:

You would play upon me, you would seem to know my stops, you would pluck out the heart
of my mystery; you would sound me from my lowest note to the top of my compass; and
there is much music, excellent voice in this little organ, yet cannot you make it speak.
'Sblood, do you think I am easier to be played on than a pipe? Call me what instrument you
will, though you can fret me, you cannot play upon me.

(3.2.352-60)

In contrast to this courtly attempt to play upon or 'sound' him, Hamlet's resonant unsettling of courtly
language follows a different tune. For his quibbles remind us constantly of Hamlet's familial displacement, as
a son and heir whose place in a masculine genealogy of kings is no longer certain. In these puns, as well as in
the tropes which are applied to him by others, we find a curious refiguring of Denmark's 'heir'—a word which,
significantly, is only evoked through homophony in this play—in relationship to 'th'incorporal air' (3.4.109).

In his magisterial study of Shakespeare's Pronunciation, where he aimed to recover many Elizabethan
homonyms which are no longer pronounced alike, Helge Kökeritz concluded that hair-heir-here-hare were
four words often pronounced similarly in early modern English; in particular, he noted the likely pun on
air-heir in Hamlet, together with related puns on hair-heir and heir-here from other Shakespearian plays.1
Through a common interlingual pun, whereby mollis aer (Lat.: soft air) was equated with mulier, the Latin for
woman, the attributes of air were frequently associated with the female sex in the English Renaissance. But
although Shakespeare could apply this pun quite conventionally, to female dramatic protagonists such as
Imogen and Cleopatra, he also used it to trope the beloved youth of the Sonnets; while Imogen is compared to
'tender air' (5.5.234, 5.6.447-53) and Cleopatra, in her dying, is 'as soft as air' (5.2.306), the beautiful youth
who is initially exhorted by the poet to 'bear' his father's memory through procreation is also a 'tender heir'
(Sonnets, 1, 4). Similarly, Hamlet's airy and echoic utterances emphasize his failure to conform to traditional
forms of masculine identity and sexuality; in particular, he rejects the implicit association which runs through
the play, between kingship and 'earing' as copulation. Yet the association of his 'air' imagery with a nexus of
images related to hearing as well as to fertility serves to remind us that a significantly different use of the ear
is central to Hamlet's punning activity, which often appears to imply vocal play on 'ear' as well as 'air' in
relation to an unspoken 'heir'. Although Kökeritz did not mention 'ear' in his hair-heir-here-hear combination,
elsewhere he noted homonymic play on ear-here, while he also observed that John Lyly puns on ear-hair in
Midas (4.1.174f.).2 Hamlet's quibbling language substitutes an echoic or airy form of auditory attention for
sexual or procreative modes of (h)earing. The motions of air as wind were often associated by the ancients
with a ghostly and uncannily repetitive auditor, the nymph Echo; Abraham Fraunce declared that Echo 'is
nothing els, but the reverberation and reduplication of the ayre. Eccho noteth bragging and vaunting, which
being contemned and despised, turneth to a bare voyce, a winde, a blast, a thing of nothing; while in Ben Jonson's *Cynthia's Revels*, first performed in 1600, the same year as *Hamlet*, Mercury asks Echo to:

Salute me with thy repercussive voice,
That I may know what caverne of the earth
Contains thy airy spirit, how or where
I may direct my speech, that thou mayst hear.

There are certainly puns in Hamlet's soliloquies, yet punning requires a social context in order to be fully effective; it is therefore an apt instrument of the satirist. It is also one of the ways in which a rhetorical emphasis upon the singular fate of the tragic protagonist, as articulated through soliloquy or monologue, can be juxtaposed with a dialogic form of self-undoing, in a comic discourse which is less focussed on the subjective T, and more on the exposure of an illusory social mask. At the same time, as Gregory Ulmer has observed, the pun can often function as a 'puncept', in its formation of new concepts which may hint at another order of knowledge.

Through multiple entendre, unobserved or hidden relationships can be demonstrated, as various homophones reverberate echoically throughout a text. It is above all through his relentless quibbling that Hamlet mediates upon the sexuality of—and within—families. Yet the oblique meanings of his word-play also extend beyond this immediate sphere of familiarity. For Hamlet reintroduces nature, the body and death into the sphere of courtly discourse, reimagining courtly society in terms of an 'overgrowth' within nature, and thereby reassimilating culture into nature. Thus, in a trope used several times in the play, 'rank' as the foul smell and abundant growth of weeds is substituted for social rank: 'things rank and gross in nature / Possess it merely' (1.2.136-7). Similarly, Claudius' kingship is troped as a sexual excess which is also a 'moor' or wilderness, as well as a disturbing racial difference (3.4.66). And in spite of his several misogynistic diatribes, which attribute this degenerative trend in nature to the female body and female sexuality in particular, through his quibbling language Hamlet also tropes himself as having an obscure figurative association with these processes of decay.

In his encounter with his father's ghost, Hamlet is informed of Claudius' twofold poisoning of the ear of Denmark. Claudius has killed Old Hamlet with 'juice of cursed hebenon', poured 'in the porches of mine ears' (1.5.62-3); furthermore, he has deceived the court as to the nature of the king's death: 'the whole ear of Denmark / Is by a forgèd process of my death / Rankly abused' (1.5.36-8). But Hamlet, the other ear—and other heir—of Denmark, has already begun to hear Claudius' courtly discourse otherwise—or satirically. He is now fully undeceived by his exchange with the airy spirit. In the ghost's imagery of ears there is an implicit quibble upon 'earing' as copulation, since it is through his incestuous marriage, as well as his murderous attack on the royal ear, that Claudius has interrupted the patrilineal transmission of royal power. The usurper's assumed sexual appetite parallels what Hamlet sees as the disorderly disseminating power of nature—with the result that, in Hamlet's eyes, the state of Denmark 'grows to seed', while Claudius is a 'mildewed ear' of corn (3.4.63). It seems, therefore, that the usurper is a chief tare or weed (in Latin, this could sometimes be *aera* as well as the more common *lolium*) in what Hamlet now defines as the 'unweeded garden' of the world; and of course, like Lucianus in *The Murder of Gonzago*, Claudius has literally used 'midnight weeds' to poison or 'blast' (like a strong wind blighting a crop) both Old Hamlet's life and Young Hamlet's inheritance. But while his uncle, as a 'mildewed ear', is associated by Hamlet with the paradox of a degenerative fertility within nature, Hamlet's own wit performs a more oblique and airy form of generation as well as (h)earing. This is inspired not so much by a commitment to the monarchy as the political (h)earing of the state as by a more feminine and aesthetically responsive form of hearing: one which is appropriate to the narration or the performance of tragedy, and which also interprets human suffering as inextricably interwoven with a tragedy within nature.
In Greek tragedy, the role of listener was an important function of the chorus, as the primary auditors and spectators of the tragic events. It is this echoic and choric mode of hearing which is implicitly required by the ghost of Old Hamlet when he describes his murder to his son; like the mythological figure of Echo, Young Hamlet is left to repeat the ghost's final words: 'Now to my word: / It is "Adieu, adieu, remember me"' (1.5.111-12). But this acutely responsive and implicitly feminine mode of hearing is also comparable to that enacted by Dido when she asks Aeneas to tell her of the fall of Troy, for it is Dido's place which Hamlet effectively occupies when in Act 2 he asks the player to give an impromptu performance of Aeneas' tale. And the more feminine faculty of hearing which motivates Hamlet's interest in the drama also appears to involve responsiveness to the mysterious resonance of nature within language; in the last act, he will trope the more discerning members of society as 'the most fanned and winnowed opinions' (5.2.153): in a figure that is probably derived from the winnowing of the soul by wind in the *Aeneid* (6.740), they are like ears of corn which have been separated out from the chaff by the activity of the wind. Similarly, through his ironic quibbling, Hamlet uses his different style of hearing to effect an airy and echoic reordering of the world around him, in a discursive equivalent to winnowing whose spiritual implications are apparent from the traditional affinity of air and wind with spirit as well as breath (from the Latin *spiritus*). A chief result of this reclassification through punning is a reinterpretation of those distorted relations between kin which are integral to the tragedy.

The theme of a kinship which is both rather less than affectionate and also excessive or incestuous is wittily introduced by Hamlet's first paronomasic play on 'kin' and 'kind'. *Adnominatio* or *paronomasia* (or 'prosonomasia', as it was sometimes called in the Renaissance) depends on a slight change, lengthening or transposition of the letters in a word; Henry Peacham defines the trope as 'a certayne declyninge into a contrarye, by a lykelyhoode of letters, eyther added, chaunged, or taken awaye', while George Puttenham describes it as 'a figure by which ye play with a couple of words or names much resembling, and because the one seemes to answere th'other by manner of illusion, and doth, as it were, nick him, I call him the Nicknamer chaunged, or taken awaye'.

In response to Claudius' greeting, 'But now, my cousin Hamlet, and my son—', Hamlet murmurs his aside: 'A little more than kin, and less than kind' (1.2.64-5). The quibble aptly suggests the difficulty of finding suitable words to represent Claudius' outrageous transgression of the conventional boundaries of kinship, which is also, Hamlet implies, a subversion of courtly conventions of *gentilité* or kindness. However, Hamlet's subsequent homophonic quibble on 'son', is made to his uncle's face, inspired by Claudius' own indirect pun on son-sun in his query about Hamlet's mourning garb. To Claudius' question: 'How is it that the clouds still hang on you?', Hamlet replies 'Not so, my lord, I am too much i'th' sun' (1.2.66-7). This ironically suggests that whereas another homophone of kin and kind—king—does describe Claudius' situation, through the traditional association of king with sun it is also related to Hamlet's own position, as a son (and heir). The pun spells out more clearly the still unspoken pun on kin and king, allying an excess of kinship (since Hamlet is not Claudius' son, and Claudius has married his brother's wife) with an image of kingship (the sun) that is itself excessive, apparently because its brightness is incompatible with those conventions of mourning dress which (in contrast to Hamlet) the Danish court has signalily failed to observe. But beneath its apparent compliment to the king as sun, the quibble also alludes to a potentially unhealthy surplus of sons or heirs; we are reminded that in spite of his mourning attire, as a king's son, Hamlet too has a homophonic affinity with the sun, and that, like Claudius, he too may have an unexpected generative potential.

The peculiar difference of Hamlet's disseminating activity is made clear in his retorts to Gertrude. Her description of dying as 'common' is allied by Hamlet's ironic iteration with the 'common' or vulgar usage of 'to die', evoking thereby the commonness of another, sexual, dying; similarly, her question, 'Why seems it so particular with thee?' (1.2.75) is converted by Hamlet into a barbed criticism of the King and Queen's courtly semblance of mourning: 'Seems, madam? Nay, it is, I know not "seems"' (1.2.76). This ironic differing of 'seems', which additionally hints at the links between courtly seeming and the spilling of generative seed (from the Latin: *semen*), also anticipates the 'enseamèd bed' that Hamlet will later accuse the Queen of
copulating in with Claudius. The rejection by Hamlet of sexual activity is also implied in his subsequent reference to a near-synonym for 'seems', when he tells Gertrude that 'I have that within which passeth show' (1.2.85); later, in his quibbling exchange with Ophelia during the play scene, the sexual meaning of 'show' will be stressed. None the less, it is Hamlet's mocking echoes of courtly language which turn the meaning of 'common' or ordinary words back towards the body and sexuality. He will warn Polonius, in a remark which appears to imply his own erotic intentions towards Ophelia: 'Let her not walk 'tis sun. Conception is a blessing, but not as your daughter may conceive. Friend, look to't' (2.2.186-7). Here the use of a semantic pun, or antanaclasis, in which the same word (conception) has two different meanings, clarifies the difference of Hamlet's fertilizing powers from those of his uncle; the nephew's sun-like powers seed a legacy or inheritance which operates above all at the level of signs (from the Greek, semeion), in the realm of words and ideas. And while he assists conception, as understanding, in women in particular—for the 'conceits' which are attributed to both Gertrude and Ophelia (3.4.104, 4.5.44) are directly or indirectly inspired by Hamlet—this son also 'conceives' much himself. For him, morbid meditations, or 'conceits' concerning natural and human corruption, are themselves part of a (re)generative process. But if, through his quibble on 'conception', the gendered identity of the heir is effectively called into question, what kind of heir is he?

As The Murder of Gonzago is about to be performed, Claudius greets Hamlet with 'How fares our cousin Hamlet?' (3.2.89). Hamlet replies with a triple quibble. Redefining 'fares' in terms of sustenance, he simultaneously converts 'fare' to 'air' by paronomasia, and he also quibbles thereby on the unspoken 'heir': 'Excellent, i'faith, of the chameleon's dish. I eat the air, promise-crammed. You cannot feed capons so' (3.2.90-1). Although the word 'heir' is only evoked through homophony in the play, this quibble makes explicit the obscure but important connection which runs through the play, between the dispossessed 'heir' of Denmark and 'air'; at the same time, it presents us with the trope of the displaced heir as a 'chameleon' or shape-shifter who is not, he warns Claudius, as stupid as a castrated cock or 'capon': a bird which allows itself to be overfed for the table. Instead, it seems, Hamlet is mysteriously feeding on himself (as heir/air), in a way which is not only consistent with the mutable identity of the chameleon (a creature which was nourished by air), but which also hints at his affinity with the mysterious singularity of the double-gendered phoenix. And the substance which Hamlet figuratively feeds on is paradoxically full as well as empty, although as 'promise-crammed', its fecundity is associated only with words. Thus while the empty flattery of Claudius to his 'son' is ironically dismissed by Hamlet, his quibble suggests none the less that the airy substance of speech does afford him a curious kind of nourishment, where none might be expected.

This metamorphosis of the heir of Denmark through and in relation to air begins, of course, on the battlements of Elsinore, where, as Hamlet and his companions wait for the ghost to appear, he declares: 'The air bites shrewdly, it is very cold'. To this Horatio replies: 'It is a nipping and an eager air' (1.4.1-2). His words aptly convey the change that has already begun to affect Hamlet, in his assumption of a satiric demeanour, expressed through a mordant or biting wit which is 'eager', or sour. In its later echo by the ghost's reference to the curdling of his blood by Claudius' poison, 'like eager droppings into milk' (1.5.69), this reference to the eager air, ear or heir attributes to Hamlet a property of bitterness which parallels the corrupting effects of Claudius' fratricide. But these images in Act 1 also give a new, autoerotic dimension to Hamlet's satiric temper. For as he develops a new, biting relationship to the air, as well as to the courtly language (or promises) which fill it, he is also consuming his identity as heir.

In feeding upon himself (as well as others) through his mordant quibbling, Hamlet plays the part of Narcissus as well as Echo. Like the addressee of Shakespeare's Sonnets, he can be accused of self-love, or of 'having traffic with thyself alone' (Sonnets, 4.9). But in also assuming the implicitly feminine role of the 'tender heir' (as mollis aer or mulier) who will bear the father's memory (Sonnets, 1.4), Hamlet is able to redefine both his father's and his own inheritance verbally or vocally, through his airy conceits. In this respect, his own legacy or inheritance will be twofold: while his 'story' is bequeathed directly to Horatio, who by telling it will preserve his name, it is Fortinbras who will be the ultimate recipient both of that story and of Hamlet's 'dying voice'—which chooses him, perforce, as the future king of Denmark. Significantly, neither man is even a
member of Hamlet's kin-group, much less his child. Hamlet thereby refigures inheritance in terms of a phoenix-like succession to other men (and most importantly, to two rather than to one), as a succession which circumvents the generative obligations of patriliny. And this formation of a different bonding 'between men'—a bonding across rather than within families—is effected by the historical reverberations of Hamlet's echoing voice.

When Polonius refers to Hamlet's replies as 'pregnant', he attributes a feminine or fecund character to his quibbling; similarly, the tropes and puns used by Claudius of Hamlet's melancholy or madness figure it as concealing an airy fecundity which is apparently feminine. The prince is twice imaged as a female bird on her nest in late spring or early summer: 'There's something in his soul / O'er which his melancholy sits on brood' (3.1.167-8);

This is mere madness,  
And thus a while the fit will work on him.  
Anon, as patient as the female dove  
When that her golden couplets are disclosed,  
His silence will sit drooping  
(5.1.281-5)

But a more grotesque, and implicitly masculine, version of this differing of gendered models of generation is later proposed by Hamlet himself when, in his remark to Polonius about the dangers of Ophelia walking T the sun', he defines the sun as a breeder of worms or maggots which eat the flesh, and so accelerate the decay of dead matter: 'For if the sun breed maggots in a dead dog, being a good kissing carrion—' (2.2.182-3). Yet in the myth of the phoenix as reported by Pliny (an account which was often cited in the Renaissance), a worm or maggot plays a central part in the bird's solitary work of regeneration through self-consumption: Pliny tells us that 'from its bones and marrow is born first a sort of maggot, and this grows into a chicken'.

In his reflexive relationship to air, therefore, Hamlet has a superficial resemblance to Narcissus as well as Echo. However, several of the images I have mentioned were connected in Renaissance iconography with Hermes or Mercury, a classical deity whose identity was especially marked by paradox and doubleness. This god, whose emblematic creature was a cock, herald of the dawn, and who was frequently depicted with a pipe as well as his more familiar caduceus, combined his role as a divine messenger and god of eloquence with attributes of trickery, secrecy and concealment; according to Richard Linche in The Fountaine of Ancient Fiction: 'Mercurie was often taken for that light of knowledge, & spirit of understanding, which guides men to the true conceavement of darke and enigmaticall sentences'. And Mercury's identification by Macrobius with 'that power [of the sun] from which comes speech' hints at another, solar, aspect of his classical identity, whereby he was associated with the return of fertility to the earth in springtime. The affinity between Mercury and obscure yet meaningful utterances makes it hardly surprising that in Cynthia's Revels it is Mercury who temporarily restores the speech of Echo, inviting her to 'strike music from the spheres, / And with thy golden raptures swell our ears' (1.2.63-4). It was this play, in fact, which was the first production of the 'little eyases', or young hawks, whose 'eyrie' was the Blackfriars playhouse: the Children of the Chapel.

Yet Charles Dempsey has recently pointed out, in his reinterpretation of Botticelli's Primavera, that it was Mercury as a wind-god (for example, in the Aeneid, 4, 223ff.), able to calm harsh winds and storms, and to disperse clouds, who was most explicitly regarded as a god of spring, or Mercurius Ver.

Botticelli shows Mercury dispersing and softening clouds with his upraised caduceus in the Primavera, a representation of him that unequivocally identifies him as acting in his archaic persona as a springtime wind god. By this action he ends the season that began with the warming west blowing its regenerative breath over the bare earth, shown as Zephyr and
In the *Primavera*, clusters of seeds swirl about the god's winged sandals, but no act of copulation is associated with this generative process. Instead, Mercury's fertilizing role is implied to supplement rather than complement that of Venus as a goddess of nature. Indeed, although the mythographers are understandably silent on the subject, their curious debates about whether or not Mercury has a beard, together with the emphasis on his youthfulness (in other words, his difference from adult masculinity), created a distinct aura of ambiguity around his sexual identity, as Joseph A. Porter has shown.

The *Primavera* suggests that Mercury enjoys a different and more harmonious relationship with the feminine generative principle within nature from that attributed to figures of masculine generation. In alchemical texts, Mercury likewise emblematized the mysterious changes wrought within nature or matter by a principle of ambiguous gender, sometimes called *Mercurius duplex*; in this literature, 'our Mercury' was analogous to the *spiritus* which was the secret transforming substance within matter, and was variously described as 'divine rain', 'May dew', 'dew of heaven', 'our honey'. Such was its ambivalent character, however, that alchemical Mercury was also identified with that part of matter which, phoenix-like, fed upon itself in order to produce transmutation.

Similarly, Hamlet's puns may indeed articulate a covert but coherent level of meaning, in a Renaissance alchemization of language. While his mercurial messages function to disrupt the fixity of social identities—along with the embassies or utterances of aberrant father figures—they hint too at the existence of a different order, hidden within the visible one. Douglas Brooks-Davies has pointed out that the imagery of Mercury was often appropriated by royalist panegyrics during the Renaissance; yet in Mercury's oblique association with Hamlet, what appears to be figured is the enigmatic difference of a son and heir who is identified with 'th'incorporal air' and its movements, and hence with a grotesque form of verbal as well as vernal regeneration—through worms of maggots. In French, worms are *vers*; this not only links spring—*le ver*—with the worm, but could also suggest an additional pun in Hamlet's discourse of worms: on the putrefying activity of *vers* as verse. This serves to remind us that in spite of a nominal affinity, Hamlet never occupies the solid place of the earthly father; instead he is distinguished by a mutability of identity which implicates him in the more sexually ambiguous spheres of nature and spirit, and identifies him especially with the mobility of air or wind. It is note-worthy in this connection that it is the mercurial bird, the cock (whose castrated equivalent—the capon—Hamlet mentions in his ironic remark to Claudius about eating the air), which by its crowing dispels the apparition of the paternal ghost in the first scene of the play, thereby eliciting allusions to the cock's connection with that other son/sun figure, Christ, with whom the *Mercurius* of the alchemists was indeed often equated (1.1.119-46).

Hamlet's satirical rejection of the generative activity—or 'earing'—which would make a son a father has often been dismissed as misogyny; by this move, however, he confirms his separation from that genealogy of fathers upon which a hereditary (in contrast to an elective) model of kingship depends. And curiously, this is a dislocation which Claudius' assumption of the throne has already initiated. Yet through his mercurial and quibbling language 'of darke and enigmaticall sentences' Hamlet accords the final inheritance of all costly or aristocratic breeding to nature, and 'my lady Worm': 'Here's fine revolution, an we had the trick to see't' (5.1.88-9).

Notes

1 Helgë Kökeritz, *Shakespeare's Pronunciation* (New Haven, 1953), pp. 90-1, 111. Kökeritz observes that air-heir are punned on by Lyly in *Mother Bombie*, 2.2.24-6 and 5.3.13, and are given as homonyms in Charles Butler, *English Grammar* (1634) and R. Hodges, *A Special Help to Orthographie* (1643). He emphasizes that 'no homonymic pun has been admitted here which has not stood the combined test of phonology and context' (pp. 64-5). See also Margreta de Grazia and Peter Stallybrass, 'The materiality of the Shakespearian text',

1185
Shakespeare Quarterly, 44 (Fall 1993), 3, pp. 255-83, where the wordplay in Macbeth on air-hair-heir is discussed.

2 Kökeritz, Shakespeare’s Pronunciation, p. 111. See also Stephen Booth's comment on 'hearsay' in Sonnet 21, line 13, in his edition of Shakespeare's Sonnets (New Haven, 1978).


Critical Essays: Mourning and Misogyny: Hamlet, The Revenger's Tragedy, and the Final Progress of Elizabeth I, 1600-1607

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I

In 1597, André Hurault, Sieur De Maise and Ambassador Extraordinary from Henri IV, noted that although the English people still professed love for their aging queen, the sentiments of the nobility were such that "the English would never again submit to the rule of a woman."1 There may have been more coincidence between high and low opinion than de Maise thought. On the evening of Elizabeth's death six years later, the streets of
London were lit by festive bonfires and punctuated by cries of "We have a king!" The advent of an orderly and Protestant succession does not in itself account for such a celebratory spirit; in fact, it was a significant transformation in the body politic, a reincorporation and regendering of monarchy, that was being heralded. Rather than a seamless transition of power reminding all the populace that the corporate body of the monarch was immortal, unchanging, and unaltered by the demise of a particular sovereign, the death of Elizabeth marked a breach in the body politic as much as a continuation of it, and one that could be figured, at least by some, as a welcome discontinuity. The queen is dead—long live the king.

There were extensive and sincere eulogies, to be sure, heartfelt expressions of grief over the passing of Elizabeth, but during the last years of her reign the "political misogyny of the early years" had also resurfaced strongly throughout her court and beyond its confines. It would not take many years of Jacobean rule to complicate the desire for a male sovereign, of course. As Christopher Haigh has noted, an idealized portrait of Elizabeth as a shrewd ruler and capable strategist emerged gradually over the first decade of James's reign, oftentimes in the form of a "coded commentary" on the defects of that reign. But the recuperation and even reinvention of such a queen—Gloriana, the Virgin Queen, who had reigned for a remarkable span of forty-five years—seems a more complicated cultural process than Haigh's pragmatic account suggests. It is this process of accommodation and revision, marked as it is by an uncertain economy between mourning and misogyny, that I wish to examine here; I am interested not only in Elizabeth herself but also in the complex and ambivalent affective process that her death allows us to glimpse—a process that might be called mourning under the sign of patriarchy. Indeed, the possibility I wish to entertain is that, for the Renaissance, (male) mourning is sometimes difficult to dissociate from misogyny: that misogyny may in fact be an integral part of the mourning process when the lost object or ideal being processed is a woman, especially but not exclusively when that woman is a queen of England, too.

Human emotions are no more free from historical and cultural construction than are genders or ideologies or gestures; that is to say, emotions and other forms of human affect have a history, or rather histories, since the differences traced by cultural historians, historical psychologists, and anthropologists must be charted along specific cultural, regional, communal, and geopolitical axes as well as temporal ones. When dealing with a contemporaneous or "living" culture, however, affective life is relatively accessible: an anthropologist may not only be able to discriminate between a wink and a blink (to use Clifford Geertz's famous example) but may also be able to postulate with some success, through interviews with informants, the "structures of feeling" that invest ostensibly common or shared human emotions with cultural difference. But when fieldwork is limited to archival interrogations of past cultures, an impassable interpretive aporia is soon reached, such that the analysis of even public and recorded expressions of emotions is difficult and fraught with uncertainty—an uncertainty that increases considerably, needless to say, when one moves from the domain of gestures or externalized behavior to the domain of feeling. For example, we know—thanks in part to Jean de Léry's proto-ethnological account of his voyage to Brazil—that when a sixteenth-century Tupinamba covered his or her face and wept, it was in a ritualized gesture of welcome. But we do not and, in this instance, can never know what emotions were thereby expressed: whether it was joy, or humility, or proleptic sorrow (since any arrival foreshadows departure), or some combination of these and other affective registers that was both felt and conveyed—conveyed, at least, when the party being welcomed was another Tupinamba, well-schooled in his or her own cultural codes, rather than a Frenchman.

Beyond such general caveats, it should also be noted that both mourning and misogyny, considered individually, pose interpretive challenges specific to late-sixteenth-century English culture. Misogyny presents an interpretive embarrassment of riches: it is everywhere, unabashed in its articulation and so overdetermined in its cultural roots that individual instances sometimes seem emotionally underdetermined, rote and uninflcted expressions of what would go without saying if it weren't said so often. By contrast, articulated expressions of grief are far less common. Private personal diaries, in which one would expect to find subjective emotional responses recorded, are themselves rare in the period; the expressions of individual grief which do exist can easily strike the modern reader as remote and unfeeling, leading even so astute a student of
the past as Lawrence Stone to confuse historical and cultural difference with absence and to declare that major bereavements were not felt as such in the period, since "in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries interpersonal relations were at best cold and at worst hostile." For any inquiry into the entanglement or interaction of such forms of affect, Elizabeth clearly provides a salutary and strategic methodological focus, as a woman who so fully commanded the political life of the nation and for such an extensive period that she also inscribed herself deeply in the cultural imagination of Renaissance England. The final progress of Elizabeth—the cultural processing of her age, in both senses of that term—was completed long after her funeral procession took place but begun some years before it, when her aging body first announced the proximity of her last days; it was enacted not in the streets of London or in the provinces but in the political unconscious, and to catch a glimpse of it we have to broaden our field of inquiry beyond the traditional resources of political history—journals and letters written before and after the queen's death, or the histories of Greville and Camden—and turn, among other places, to the Elizabethan and Jacobean stage. It has often been remarked that the resurgent political misogyny of Elizabeth's court in the 1590s coincided with a dramatic increase, as it were, of misogyny onstage; in the years after her death, as recent studies have also begun to detail, the popular stage manifested an acute and complex investment in the imaginary reworking and resolution of Elizabeth's reign. But my own recourse to the popular theater is not solely motivated by such topical resonances. For anyone concerned, as I am here, with the cultural construction of emotions and other forms of affect, the popular stage represents a unique historical resource, and one whose significance in its own time cannot be limited to the passive role of merely recording or reflecting early modern structures of feeling.

The symbolic economy of English culture (by which I refer not just to official efforts to manage and maintain dominant systems of belief but to the entire repertoire of cultural representations and practices, official and unofficial, that shaped the political, social, and psychological subject and defined his or her place in the cultural hierarchy) underwent a significant and radical transformation in the sixteenth century. The English Reformation itself was hardly a tidy affair, marked as it was by the succession of no less than five official state religions, each claiming the status of unrivaled and absolute truth, and all within the space of a single generation; one of the results was to displace and destabilize the very notion of the orthodox or the absolute, producing a skeptical if not cynical relativism evident, in court records, even among the lower classes. During the same period, individuals commanded an increasingly greater access to heterodox ideas and ideologies, aided as they were by the rapid expansion of print culture and by what we think was a slow yet steady rise in literacy. But contemporary fears of an increasingly informed and hence more autonomous subject were focused not only on those who could read, and with good reason; as Tessa Watt has recently reminded us, the boundary between oral and literate cultures in the period was highly permeable, such that ideas and ideologies were disseminated not only by direct and unmediated access to a printed text but also by diverse processes of re-presentation and representation, in official and unofficial forums ranging from the pulpit to the tavern. In the case of sixteenth-century London, however, what the debate over literacy obscures is a much more explosive expansion of the symbolic economy—the one produced by the fiercely contested emergence and rapid institutionalization of the popular stage.

The controversy provoked by the popular theater was largely ideological and political rather than aesthetic, and the reasons for this are relatively clear. Public drama was not customarily graced with the status of literature or, less anachronistically, of poesy. More important, in an age when the domain in which knowledge was produced and circulated was still a relatively contained system, any significant expansion of that domain, any significant difference in the degree to which ideas and attitudes could be disseminated, threatened to become a difference in kind as well—to alter the structure of knowledge by redefining its boundaries, to force a transition from a relatively limited and closed symbolic system to a more radically open economy of knowledge and representation. That the emerging institution in question was, at best, quasi-illicit only exacerbated the dilemma of its emergence. Combatted throughout its history by the city, licensed but hardly controlled by the court, the Elizabethan public theater emerged from and appropriated a place within the fissures and contradictions of the cultural landscape; although it rapidly became, in Jean Howard's words,
"one of the chief ideological apparatuses of Elizabethan society," it was neither the product nor the organ of the state but rather the result of a historically determined collusion between artisanal entrepreneurs and a socially diverse and astoundingly large audience. And unlike other expansions of the discursive domain in the period, literacy was not the price of admission to the theater, a fact which gave the stage a currency and accessibility rivaled only by the pulpit, which it threatened to eclipse.

Unlike the pulpit, of course, the stage was an affective rather than a didactic forum; the ideas and ideologies, stories and histories real (whatever that might mean) and imaginary that it made available, and hence appropiable, for a significant portion of the population were also dramatically embodied, and by modes of theatrical representation that were themselves significant departures from English dramatic tradition. The shift away from the morality tradition and its abstract personification of states of being and toward the particular, discursive, and theatrical embodiment of affective characters demanded and produced new powers of identification, projection, and apprehension in audiences, altering the threshold not only of dramatic representation but also of self-representation, not only of the fictional construction of character but also of the social construction of the self. As a forum for the representation, solicitation, shaping, and enacting of affect in various forms, for both the reflection and, I would argue, the reformation of emotions and their economies, the popular stage of early modern England was a unique contemporaneous force. It may well have participated in what many before me, from Weber and Elias to Foucault, have posited as a fundamental reshaping of the political, social, and psychological subject during this period; it certainly served as a prominent affective arena in which significant cultural traumas and highly ambivalent events, such as the death of Elizabeth, could be directly or indirectly addressed, symbolically enacted, and brought to partial and imaginary resolution.

As I noted above, misogyny is generally on the rise in the drama of late Elizabethan and early Jacobean years, but it intersects with mourning in certain plays and genres more fully and forcefully than in others. Revenge tragedy has long been recognized, on the one hand, for the speed with which it becomes virtually synonymous with stage misogyny and, on the other, for its generic and sometimes profound investment in recognizably Renaissance processes of mourning—revenge, after all, is the private response to socially unaccommodated grief—but typically mourning and misogyny have been considered in isolation from one another, in separate studies and only insofar as they duplicate Renaissance habits of thought articulated elsewhere, in medical or philosophical discourse. Yet it is in late Elizabethan and early Jacobean revenge tragedy that the aging and posthumous body of Elizabeth is most fully engaged and problematized, in an apprehensive interplay of mourning and misogyny, revisionary desire and aggression, idealization and travesty. Remarking on a process of sovereign incorporation more literal than the psychic one that Freud describes in "Mourning and Melancholia," Hamlet notes that even "a king may go a progress through the guts of a beggar" (4.3.30-31); he does so from within a play that infuses a new undercurrent into the subgenre to which it belongs. From 1600 to 1607—from Shakespeare's Hamlet, that is to say, to Middleton's The Revenger's Tragedy—the various bodies of the queen go a progress, if not through the guts of a beggar then through the visceral responses of those slightly better off, who could afford the price of admission to experience, in the popular theater, the very age and body of her time.

II

In 1600 the Virgin Queen was sixty-eight years old, and contemporaneous accounts of her appearance detail the degree to which she was showing her age. In that same year, however, the Rainbow Portrait was issued, placing in circulation a new image of an unaging and youthful Gloriana. Yet the contradiction between the age inscribed on the queen's body and the highly sexualized aura generated by the cult of Elizabeth over the years and reinvoked in such late portraits was more complexly wrought than any distinction between reality and image can encompass; presenting or representing her body—"showing her age," to recall my own colloquial expression in a fuller register—necessitated a full and overdetermined embodiment of this sovereign contradiction. Although prospects of childbearing and marriage were long past and a Protestant successor was
waiting in the wings, the aging of Elizabeth during the last decade of her reign was still a highly fraught political, physical, and symbolic issue, as she herself well knew.

"I think not to die so soon," Elizabeth told the French ambassador in 1597, "... and am not so old as they think." De Maisse had already recorded, in journal entries from previous audiences, some of Elizabeth's efforts to counter what "they think," to embody in her age an alluring and captivating appeal:

> She was strangely attired in a dress of silver cloth, white and crimson. ... She kept the front of her dress open, and one could see the whole of her bosom [gorge], and passing low, and often she would open the front of this robe with her hands as if she was too hot. ... Her bosom [or throat; gorge] is somewhat wrinkled as well as {one can see for} the collar that she wears round her neck [col], but lower down her flesh is exceeding white and delicate, so far as one could see.

> As for her face, it is and appears to be very aged. It is long and thin, and her teeth are very yellow and unequal, compared with what they were formerly. ... Many of them are missing so that one cannot understand her easily when she speaks quickly. Her figure is fair and tall and graceful in whatever she does. ... The queen's behavior was apparently not exceptional; in an entry that records a subsequent audience de Maisse tells us

> [S]he was clad in a dress of black taffeta. ... She had a petticoat of white damask, girdled, and open in front, as was also her chemise, in such a manner that she often opened this dress and one could see all her belly, and even to her navel [tout l'estomac jusques au nombril] ... When she raises her head she has a trick of putting both hands on her gown and opening it insomuch that all her belly can be seen.

As Louis Montrose has noted in detail, Elizabeth's display of her bosom was a complex register of cultural and sumptuary symbolism, signifying her status as a maiden and as a nurturing and bountiful mother, a "virgin-mother—part Madonna, part Ephesian Diana," whose "conspicuous self-displays were also a kind of erotic provocation." In private the signs of age in the queen's face were apparently left unobscured by cosmetics, heightening the incongruity between advanced age ("her face ... is ... very aged ... long and thin") and the exposed bosom of a maiden ("lower down her flesh is exceeding white and delicate"). In the public domain this incongruity was lessened and mystified to a certain degree by the circulation of painted images of the unaging sovereign body, but even here the line between image and reality, idealized portrait and the physical lineaments of age, is difficult to draw. Anthony Rivers, a Jesuit priest, reported that at Christmas celebrations in 1600, Elizabeth was painted "in some places near half an inch thick." The queen was painted on canvases more than one; she was herself one of those canvases, a painted image no less than the Rainbow Portrait was.

Of course few outside the court saw either the Rainbow Portrait or the queen's holiday face, but it would be a mistake to conclude from this that Elizabeth's erotic displays and painted selves were either inconsequential or mere vanity, given all that was at stake in the sovereign aura. They were efforts to imbue the aging natural body of the monarch with the ageless aura of the body politic, which, as Marie Axton notes, "was supposed to be contained within the natural body of the Queen." Elizabeth's attempt to reinvest her final years with the erotic dynamics of courtship and desire—with the dynamics of Petrarchan romance that had so fully informed her earlier reign—was an effort to close the gap or internal fissure that was, in the 1590s, increasingly apparent between the queen's two bodies. It was an ambivalent enterprise at best, especially where cosmetic portraiture or face-painting was concerned, as Thomas Tuke's "Treatise against Painting" makes clear. According to Tuke, the painted woman, like the monarch, has two bodies; but the painted woman is an
idolatrous and even curiously transvestite parody of the incorporated monarchical body, one that violates categories of gender and grammar as well as prerogatives of divine creation:

She is a creature that has need to be twice defined. … [T]hough she be the creature of God, as she is a woman, yet is she her own creatress, as a picture. Indeed a plain woman is but half a painted woman, who is both a substantive and an adjective, and yet not of the neuter gender: but a feminine as well consorting with a masculine, as ivy with an ash.32

Tuke and other commentators also describe the poisonous effects of the mercury-based cosmetics used in the period; as Laurie A. Finke has noted, such descriptions serve as both medical warnings and ideologically potent metaphorical images, vividly registering "all the horrors, both visual and olfactory, of [a] putrefying corpse."33 In such treatises a cosmically enhanced visage figures as a sign not of sexual allure but of the skull beneath the skin—or rather, sexual allure and the skull are combined in a conundrum that is the aging female body, for in a period that linguistically coded sexual climax as a form of death, "dying" the face introduces a third register to the common Renaissance pun. The painted lady does not disguise death or obscure the skull beneath her painted flesh; she is a memento mori herself, without need of demystification.

Even aside from the necessity to paint "near half an inch thick," however, the erotic dynamics of Elizabethan rule had always entailed a certain ambivalence and danger, involving as they did the construction of an ambiguous desire for the queen, not as monarch but as woman. An incident in 1600 documents Elizabeth's continuing success, even in her later years, in thus constructing her success' desires, and illustrates some of the danger involved as well. On 3 June of that year, Elizabeth's secretary, William Waad, wrote to Cecil concerning the antic disposition of one Abraham Edwardes, a "Kentish man born, and … a mariner," who first came to Waad's attention when he sent "so passionate a letter to her Majesty" and was subsequently arrested and imprisoned "for drawing his dagger in the presence chamber." Rather than charging Edwardes with attempted regicide, Waad counselled his removal to Bedlam Hospital, noting that "the fellow is greatly distracted, and seems rather to be transported with a humour of love, than any purpose to attempt anything against her Majesty."34

Waad provides a curiously one-dimensional, even proto-Freudian interpretation of the scene. Edwardes's display of love in the form of a drawn dagger seems at least to combine sexual and other potential forms of physical aggression and violence; whatever the case, his act was in itself a violation of the queen's presence, and one that is tempting to relate to Hamlet's audience with another queen, when he needs to remind himself to use verbal rather than physical violence in Gertrude's chamber: "I will speak daggers to her, but use none" (3.2.387). It is relatively certain that some version of Hamlet was being presented onstage by 1600, and the play may have made its first appearance as early as 1598 or 1599, so topical allusion in the usual sense of the phrase is not at issue. Juxtaposed with Hamlet's royal audience, however, Edwardes's "humour of love" does allow us to see the queen—Elizabeth or Gertrude—through period eyes, shifting critical focus from the long-romanticized melancholy of the Dane to the aging yet erotic body of the queen, and in a manner that supplements recent suggestions that Hamlet is a play keenly aware of its late Elizabethan status, in which the impending transfer of power "from one monarch to another had to be rethought in view of the aging body of the queen."35

III

Cecil seems to have adhered to Waad's advice: Abraham Edwardes was not prosecuted as an attempted regicide, despite appearances and the ease with which a case against him could have been made, but was instead confined as an antic lover, overly receptive to the queen's graces. Hamlet may serve to condition our surprise at such peculiar and lenient treatment. In the play Hamlet's own role as an antic lover is debunked rather than confirmed by the crown, but regicide is similarly displaced from his and our attention by the eroticized and aging figure of the queen. Mourning for a dead king, even revenge, is displaced or at least
overlaid and complicated by misogyny toward a queen who is too vital, whose sexuality transgresses both her age and her brief tenure as widow.

Hamlet's first appearance onstage sets the pattern. Isolated by the mourning clothes he refuses to abandon and more aggressively distanced from the court by his barbed comments and asides (and perhaps by his stage position as well), Hamlet styles his grief as that which "passes show":

Seems, madam? Nay, it is. I know not 'seems'.
'Tis not alone my inky cloak, good mother,
Nor customary suits of solemn black,
Nor windy suspiration of forc'd breath,
No, nor the fruitful river in the eye,
Nor the dejected haviour of the visage,
Together with all forms, moods, shapes of grief,

That can denote me truly. These indeed seem,
For they are actions that a man might play;
But I have that within which passes show,
These but the trappings and the suits of woe.

(1.2.76-86)

What you see is what you get: surface and depth, appearance and reality, stage posture and being coincide and cohere fully in a proclamation of sincerity that marks all around him as theatrical dissemblers. When alone onstage, however, Hamlet immediately reveals that all is not as it seems:

Fie on't, ah fie, 'tis an unweeded garden
That grows to seed; things rank and gross in
nature
Possess it merely. That it should come to this!
But two months dead—nay, not so much, not
two—

Why, she would hang on him
As if increase of appetite had grown
By what it fed on; and yet within a month—
Let me not think on't—Frailty, thy name is
woman. …

(11.135-46)

Grief over his father's death is overlaid and supplanted by obsessive disgust over what has failed to die, here figured as the unweeded garden of Gertrude's sexual appetite, the incestuous "dexterity" of the queen (1.157) which indeed occupies the core of Hamlet's being and "denote[s] him truly," as a generalized sign of the bestial inconstancy of all womankind. Like son, like father: at the first mention of his "seeming-virtuous queen," the Ghost forgets his purpose and digresses upon Gertrude's lust and lewdness, her taste for "garbage"; and it is only the morning air that reminds him that his time is short, and that he has yet to inform Hamlet of the details of Claudius's crime. The vengeful charge of the Ghost itself focuses not on the past crime of regicide but on the ongoing sexual transgression: "Let not the royal bed of Denmark be / A couch for luxury and damned incest" (1.5.82-83). Even in the later Mousetrap scene, Claudius is hardly the observed of all observers; throughout the Player Queen and King's prologue, Hamlet's attention is for Gertrude alone, this part of the Mousetrap functioning clearly to catch the conscience not of the king but of the queen.
This obsessive concern with Gertrude is hardly news; a long history of oedipal readings begins here, typically effacing the sovereign cast of Hamlet's obsessive misogyny—Gertrude as queen—by an exclusive focus on the domestic scene, viewing the play as one more family romance—Gertrude as mother—only incidentally staged in terms of state hierarchies and monarchical sexuality. Performances governed by this critical tradition often portray Gertrude as a young queen, sometimes played by an actress who is, if anything, younger than the actor playing Hamlet. Quite recently, however, critics have suggested that the aging widowed queen of the play resonates strongly with the aging virgin queen on the throne. As Peter Erickson has remarked, "Gertrude represents the convergence of three issues—sexuality, aging . . . , and succession—that produced a sense of contradiction, even breakdown, in the cult of Elizabeth in the final years of her reign. . . . The latent cultural fantasy in Hamlet is that Queen Gertrude functions as a degraded figure of Queen Elizabeth." What I earlier called the conundrum of the aging female body, with its overdetermined registers of sexuality and death, unites the two monarchs. Aspects of the two that might seem to distinguish them—Gertrude's status, for example, as both widow and mother—also contribute to the association of royal bodies when viewed in a sixteenth-century context. Elizabeth styled herself, of course, as the sovereign mother of her subjects; she also presided over a period in which widows occupied an increasingly anomalous and threatening position, whether they remarried or remained single. As independent yet marriageable women, they recovered the one position of power available to most women in early modern patriarchal society—the social space on the threshold of marital alliance which Elizabeth had occupied so masterfully throughout her reign—but this time without parental strictures and often with enhanced economic power as well, derived from the estates inherited from their husbands. Remarriage might seem to resolve the threat posed by female independence, bringing the woman back into the fold of patriarchal hegemony, but, as Barbara J. Todd has demonstrated, in the later part of the sixteenth century the reverse was true: remarriage raised fears of greater independence, and of a kind where economic and sexual hierarchies are difficult to disentangle. After about 1570, wills began to restrict widows' access to inherited estates if they remarried, and the economic grounds for such restrictions are often overlaid with sexual anxieties. "The remarriage of any widow," as Todd puts it, "confronted every man with the threatening prospect of his own death and the entry of another into his place." Gertrude's transgression is not merely against her first husband, however. What distracts Hamlet from his almost blunted purpose is Gertrude's aging sexuality, conceived at times as a contradiction in terms, at times as a violation of her own body akin in its unnaturalness to a rebellion in the body politic: hers is a passion that "canst mutine in a matron's bones" (3.4.83), at once unimaginable and yet impossible not to imagine and visualize in graphic detail. At her age the queen's sovereignty should extend to and rule over such desires—"You cannot call it love; for at your age / The heyday in the blood is tame" (11. 68-69)—and if not, such passion is a mutineer, a traitor, a figure of "rebellious hell." The heyday in Gertrude's blood can be denigrated but cannot be exorcised from Hamlet's mind or her matron's bones or her chamber, where she lives "In the rank sweat of an enseamed bed, / Stew'd in corruption, honeying and making love / Over the nasty sty!" (11. 92-94).

Where modern productions sometimes efface the transgression of aging sexuality, the stage apparatus of the Elizabethan theater would have necessarily heightened the incongruity and contradiction embodied in Gertrude's figure. Gertrude is verbally inscribed with a sexuality that, according to Hamlet, transgresses the sovereign and aging body of the queen; onstage such a transgression would have been at once refigured and reproduced as a contradiction between the object and means of theatrical representation, the aging but sexually marked discursive body of the queen given its theatrical embodiment not by means of verisimilitude but by means of a homologous, highly sexualized contradiction of a different order. On the Elizabethan stage the skull beneath the painted skin, the mutineer in the matron's bones, would be represented not by an aging actress but by a boy, whose sexual register onstage and in the acting company was also ambivalently marked, differently but equally overdetermined, and to a considerable extent indecipherable from our own historical vantage point.
According to Freud, melancholy is produced by an incapacity to acknowledge or properly mourn death; distinguishing between Freud's nearly synonymous use of the terms incorporation and introjection to describe the mourning process, Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok have defined incorporation as the sign of this interminable mourning. The temporizing process of incorporation intervenes, as Jacques Derrida explains, whenever introjection is blocked or fails for whatever reason:

Sealing the loss of the object, but also marking the refusal to mourn, such a maneuver is foreign to and actually opposed to the process of introjection. I pretend to keep the dead alive, intact, safe (save) inside me, but it is only in order to refuse, in a necessarily equivocal way, to love the dead as a living part of me, dead save in me, through the process of introjection, as happens in so-called normal mourning.

Even if we accept such terms as relevant for other times and cultures—and some such distinction between resolved and irresolvable mourning does seem valid, whether for a play like Hamlet or for even more distant cultural contexts—we must still historicize them. For example, English culture in the last half of the sixteenth century witnessed an intense Protestant campaign against both the expression of grief and the expression of comfort or condolence toward those in mourning. As G. W. Pigman has shown, sixteenth-century treatises on mourning regard grief as a sign of "irrationality, weakness, inadequate self-control, and impiety"—the latter succinctly registered in Jonson's "Of Death":

He that feares death, or mournes it, in the iust,  
Shewes of the resurrection little trust.

Manuals on grief and bereavement counseled angry remonstration against the bereaved rather than sympathy or comfort, producing an ideologically charged cultural climate whose ramifications are difficult to determine with any rigor but which should at least condition modern critical responses to the maimed rites of mourning in a play such as Hamlet. The degree to which such strictures affected how people felt grief in the period is of course uncertain; for a brief period of time, however, they clearly altered the decorum of bereavement, casting a moralizing and religiously charged pall over traditionally available expressions of grief, whether public rites or private rituals and practices. The result for Elizabethan England may well have been a higher ratio of socially induced melancholy, in Abraham and Torok's revised sense of that term, fostering a psychic culture of incorporation rather than introjection.

Hamlet's melancholy, however, is of an entirely different order: produced as much by Gertrude's sexual vitality as by his father's death, it is the result not of an interminable or encrypted mourning but of a "prevented" mourning in the rhetorical sense of the ter—a mourning before the fact, over a vitality that one wants to be or imagines or finally produces as past and dead. It is an all-too-fully proleptic mourning, and misogyny is the sign of this prolepsis: a response to what should be dead but isn't, an aggressive and often counter-productive effort to resolve this dilemma. What is sexually vital in the aging queen becomes variously figured as its opposite, a sign of death. The Player Queen presents one aspect of this sign, and in doing so clarifies the degree to which Gertrude's sexual desire and behavior do not merely distract Hamlet from his ostensible object of mourning—the former king—but are fully folded into it as an emblem of death to the male order of state and marital hierarchies. "A second time I kill my husband dead, / When second husband kisses me in bed" (3.2.179-80). Twice in the play, Hamlet himself configures signs of female sexuality-in-age as memento mori, registering not vitality but corruption and death. To Ophelia, whose youth presumably belies the need for cosmetics, he castigates painted women as transgressive and presumptuous usurpers of divine creation ("God hath given you one face and you make yourselves another" [3.1.144-46]); in the graveyard scene Yorick's skull prompts not a reflection on human or even male mortality but a triumphant reading and declaration of female mortality: "Now get you to my lady's chamber and tell her, let her paint an inch thick, to this favor she must come" (5.1.186-89).
Although a commonplace of Renaissance misogyny, Hamlet's move from Yorick's skull to that of the painted lady is also a great deal more. It is the last instance of the pattern I briefly outlined earlier, in which an obsessive misogyny displaces or supplants grief over a male figure, and as such it marks a significant moment in the gynophobia of the play. After this moment Gertrude is no longer vilified and villainized for her sexual transgression but is instead represented as the victim of Claudius's pandering lust:

He that hath kill'd my king and whor'd my mother, 
Popp'd in between th'election and my hopes, 
Thrown out his angle for my proper life …
(5.2.64-66; my emphasis)

The change is a dramatic one: grammatical object rather than subject, victim rather than sexually transgressive agent, Gertrude no longer precipitates a misogynistic digression; she is no longer the source of obsessive concern that displaces revenge but instead has become one among several motives for revenge. This is not, it should be noted, the only difference in the Hamlet we encounter in Act 5; he reveals a new and calm assurance in the working of divine providence as well, a transformation that has sometimes been ascribed to what happens offstage, characterized as a sea-change produced by the fortuitous events onboard the ship bound for England. The muting of misogyny cannot be so ascribed, but may be located in the graveyard scene itself.

Why should the proleptic death of "my lady," Hamlet's or Shakespeare's painted queen, be figured into a moment of mourning for a court jester? What partial resolution of misogyny is enacted by such a complex and composite figure? In a play where mourning is characteristically prolonged or disrupted by prematurely foreshortened or "maimed" rites, Hamlet's encounter with Yorick's skull provides a subtle if economical glimpse of successful mourning in action, of what Abraham and Torok define as introjection rather than incorporation. Hamlet's caustic and easy cynicism over the leveling effect of death earlier in the scene, when the bones tossed up by the gravedigger are anonymous, ceases when Yorick's skull surfaces and is named. The thing Hamlet holds in his hand recalls and makes present in his mind the living figure, the vital memory from his childhood, even though the two Yoricks register at first as sheer contradiction, and what is alive in memory and imagination seems reduced to this, the decayed skull, in a moment of visceral revulsion:

Alas, poor Yorick. I knew him, Horatio, a fellow of infinite jest, of most excellent fancy. He hath bore me on his back a thousand times, and now—how abhorred in my imagination it is. My gorge rises at it.
(5.1.178-82)

Successful mourning requires a resolution of the contradiction between what is still vital in the memory and what is dead; rather than deny or avoid the contradiction, Hamlet heightens it by projecting the living memory onto the skull, lips onto the death's head, and exacerbates his revulsion by planting an imaginary (recollected) kill on the grotesque, composite overlay. He then shifts from commentary to direct address:

Here hung those lips that I have kissed I know not how oft. Where be your gibes now, your gambols, your songs, your flashes of merriment, that were wont to set the table on a roar? Not one now to mock your own grinning? Quite chop-fallen?
(11. 183-86)

The Yorick in Hamlet's mind would have mocked his own death, even his own death's head; that was, after all, his profession. The Yorick in Hamlet's hand is somber, serious, "grinning" but "quite chop-fallen." The
moment of direct address, however, is also the moment of full introjection of that which is vital, making the living memory not only a part of Hamlet but also the part he now plays, literally in the face of death; the memory is made present not only in mind but also in body and behavior, embodied and given voice and new life onstage, as Hamlet becomes Yorick, the jester mocking his own grinning.

Why such a moment is interrupted by Hamlet's final piece of misogyny, and with such a satisfied and resolute tone, is unclear unless we press the peculiarities of the scene further. The exhumation of Yorick's skull is accompanied by a curious exhumation of the past as well, a precise but perplexing concatenation of dates—not only the odd concurrence of Hamlet's birth, Fortinbras senior's death, and the sexton's entrance into his profession but also the number of years Yorick has lain in the grave—that has drawn critical attention largely because it identifies Hamlet as thirty years of age, and we all want him to be younger than that. But Hamlet's present age is hardly the final equation the scene produces; Yorick's tenure in the grave, twenty-three years, dates instead a specific moment in the past, Hamlet's age when Yorick died, and it is hardly an insignificant number. Seven was not only the canonical age of reason. In the Renaissance it was also the age of transition from childhood to youth, and from a culturally ungendered to a culturally gendered world: it was the breeching age, when the smocks in which children of both sexes were dressed gave way to gender-specific clothing, and boys were passed "out of the hands of women" and into "the hands of men."49 The reference is highly veiled, to say the least, enough so as to raise suspicions of an overly imaginative critical ingenuity at work—were it not for the fact that, a decade later, The Winter's Tale repeats and confirms this aspect of Shakespeare's gestational lexicon:

Looking on the lines
Of my boy's face, methoughts I did recoil
Twenty-three years, and saw myself unbreech'd
In my green velvet coat, my dagger muzzled,
Lest it should bite its master, and so prove
(As [ornament] oft does) too dangerous.

(1.2.153-58)50

Hamlet is not the only Shakespearean male who, in a moment of sexual and gender crisis, looks back to recall himself unbreeched. Here the speaker is Leontes, already in the throes of his developing jealousy, and he reproduces the chronology exactly: he too recoils exactly twenty-three years to remember an early modern version of a pre-oedipal phase.

If the confrontation with Yorick's skull produces the one clear instance of successful mourning in the play, then more than Yorick's death is being mourned. What Hamlet holds in his hand is no mere memento mori; it is also, perhaps preeminently, a memento of passage into the world that he, like Leontes, is now dismayed by.51 Passage into the gendered world of sexuality, the world the aging queen refuses to pass beyond, is also being mourned and perhaps even effaced for the moment, when Hamlet returns to Yorick's time and finds there a world where his own gendered identity has not yet been produced, so that signs of adult sexuality—especially in women—can be misrecognized, transvalued, and even laid to rest. "[L]et her paint an inch thick, to this favour she must come. Make her laugh at that" (5.1.187-89).

Recently Judith Butler has suggested that Freud's account of the formation of gender identity in The Ego and the Id needs to be read alongside his comments on melancholy. Freudian gender identity, according to Butler, is itself a melancholic structure formed around a taboo against homosexuality which precedes the heterosexual incest taboo:

Gender identification is a kind of melancholia in which the sex of the prohibited object is internalized as a prohibition. … If the melancholic answer to the loss of the same-sexed object is to incorporate and, indeed, to become that object through the construction of the ego
ideal, then gender identity appears primarily to be the internalization of a prohibition that proves to be formative of identity.\textsuperscript{52}

For the Victorian age and its aftermath—the period responsible for the invention of homosexuality and its taboo—Butler’s revisionary reading is both apt and brilliant.” But we are only beginning to recover some sense of earlier economies of sexual practices and cultural prohibitions, and we know next to nothing about the psychological strictures of early childhood in the Renaissance. Despite the fact that its psychological resonances are lost to us, however, the rite of passage known as the breeching age may well have constituted a significant moment of gender formation, analogous—at least insofar as it marks a transition into a more rigidly gendered world—to Butler’s melancholic structure. Historically specific, officially and culturally inscribed, the breeching age would have represented a moment crucial not to the early or primary formation of the psychological subject (whatever that might mean in the early modern period) but to the gendered codification of the cultural and political subject. For boys and girls it meant the adoption of gendered clothing; for boys, unlike girls, it meant passing "out of the hands of women" and into "the hands of men": moving out of a period when full dependency upon women was culturally maintained as the norm and into male and patriarchal adulthood.

Historically speaking, the more rigidly hierarchical the system of patriarchy, the more rabid and chronic are its expressions of misogyny. They are of course more fully, explicitly, and officially licensed, but the reasons are structural as well. The patriarchal hierarchy of early modern England was grounded in an explicit and officially promulgated ideology of male supremacy and autonomy. As Janet Adelman has recently shown, however, such autonomy was everywhere contradicted by inescapable and everyday signs of male dependency on women;\textsuperscript{54} some of the more virulent outbreaks of misogyny in the Renaissance are aggressive expressions of this contradiction, and I would include here the affective conflation of mourning and misogyny I have been tracing. In some respects such a conflation should not surprise us. Rage or anger are common components of grief in many cultures,\textsuperscript{55} most often directed toward the deceased when the survivor’s dependence on that figure is greatest—and most virulent when such dependency is itself a source of ambivalence. In a rigidly hierarchical patriarchy like Renaissance England, the death of an influential woman (whether proleptically or posthumously mourned) would mark the fullest encounter with such ambivalence, when male autonomy would be exposed, in grief itself, as male dependency—as one of the fundamental contradictions of patriarchal society.

If Hamlet could indeed regress beyond the breeching age he would resolve the contradiction, but only by abandoning the patriarchal mystifications of male autonomy and by embracing full dependency upon women. Other than for a brief moment of imaginary resolution, of course, such a regression is impossible. In the scene that follows his encounter with Yorick’s skull, Hamlet does indeed embrace his own dependency in an unprecedented and surprising manner, placing his fate in the hands of a special providence, but the divinity that shapes his end is the Christian god, the ultimate patriarch. Like other Shakespearean males, Hamlet achieves a partial if suicidal resolution of the contradictions of patriarchy by constructing a world that is not so much ungendered as free from gender differentiation—a world that is all male.\textsuperscript{56}

IV

"That woman is all male," Vindice declares in The Revenger’s Tragedy "whom none can enter" (2.1.111).\textsuperscript{57} Elizabeth, of course, styled herself as a bit of both, acknowledging that she had "the body of a weak and feeble woman, but … the heart and stomach of a king";\textsuperscript{58} after her death, however, Cecil would complain that she had been "more than a man, and, in troth, sometime less than a woman,"\textsuperscript{59} and Ben Jonson would ascribe her lifelong status as the Virgin Queen to a membrane so tough that no man could, indeed, enter her.\textsuperscript{60} Elsewhere in The Revenger’s Tragedy, the Elizabethan register of misogyny is less veiled. An encyclopedic compendium of motifs, roles, and plots from the revenge tradition—enough so that modern editors may be wrong to punctuate the title as a singular possessive—the play also serves as a dramatized interpretation of
the Elizabethan undertones I have been tracing in *Hamlet*, making explicit and clarifying the degree to which the partially resolved cycles of mourning and misogyny in the earlier play functioned as a processing of Elizabeth herself, the aging sexuality of the Virgin Queen recast in the degraded figure of the sovereign and remarried widow.

The play opens, as it were, in the graveyard scene of *Hamlet*: a long-delayed revenger stands onstage, musing on mortality and his own grief, a skull in his hand. Al-though Vindice too has lost a father and blames the lecherous Duke for that death as well, the current object of his mourning and motive for revenge, inexplicably put off for some nine years, is a woman who out of love for him spurned the Duke's advances and was poisoned for her refusal. Hers is in fact the skull that he holds, although he will withhold the name until the opportune moment. Vindice begins by addressing this as-yet-anonymous skull as an icon of the purity and chastity his lover died to preserve, but it quickly becomes a curiously ambivalent icon for contemplation, meditation, and revenge. Viewing the "ragged imperfections" and "unsightly rings" of the skull, Vindice recalls and imaginatively reinvests the "face / So far beyond the artificial shine / Of any woman's bought complexion" (1.1.20-22), but the dichotomy between true and painted beauty, the chaste virgin and (all other) cosmetically enhanced sirens, does not hold for long. Seeking terms appropriate for praising her chaste beauty and beautiful chastity, Vindice cannot master such culturally charged oxymorons without recasting them as contradictions. So beautiful was she, he continues as if in praise, that she could do what painted beauties could not: provoke desire in men otherwise inaccessible to sexual allure, so that

... the uprightest man (if such there be,  
That sin but seven times a day) broke custom  
And made up eight with looking after her;  
O she was able to ha' made a usurer's son  
Melt all his patrimony in a kiss.  

(11. 23-27)

As Peter Stallybrass has noted, Vindice's praise undoes and contradicts itself in the process of enunciation, finally making it clear that it is only in death that she is truly "beyond the artificial shine," only as a skull that her "memory [can] be reconstituted outside the realm of bought complexions." Clear to us, at any rate, for one of the remarkable aspects of this opening speech is its unbroken air of praise, as if Vindice at this point were entirely deaf to the entanglements of his own mourning and misogyny.

Such deafness is especially striking in Vindice, who can easily make Hamlet sound like a proto-feminist. Women in general he defines as intrinsically permeable bodies, subject to what might be called a fully recursive incontinence: they let everything in (that woman is all male—i.e., no woman at all—whom none can enter) and they let everything out. Women's bodies and hence their characters are commonly described as "leaky vessels" in the period, as Gail Kern Paster has shown, but Vindice brings to this commonplace a freshness verging on obscenity at one point in the play when, disguised as a mercenary malcontent, he offers to procure his own sister for the Duke's son Lussurioso (presumably the only way to gain the inner circle at court). Asked simply if he knows how to keep a secret, Vindice responds:

My lord!  
Secret? I ne'er had that disease o'th' mother,  
I praise my father. Why are men made close  
But to keep thoughts in best? I grant you this,  
Tell but some woman a secret over night,  
Your doctor may find it in the urinal i'th' morning.  

(1.3.79-84)
Modern editors are particularly chary in their glosses on these lines, reluctant to articulate Vindice's gross economy of tongue and genitalia, seeds planted in the ear and elsewhere, in a leaky vessel that cannot help but "piss away" whatever is sécrété (or secrété) within it.

When the skull returns to the stage in Act 3, Vindice has applied cosmetics to it and supplied it with a shawl; his "chaste lover" is thus costumed as a whore, her death's grin smeared with poison, for the pièce de résistance of Vindice's revenge will be to let the Duke be undone by his own lust, visited upon the courtesan Vindice has promised to supply him. Fully reconstituted in the realm of bought complexions, his lover can also now be named: she proves to be none other than Gloriana, the namesake of Elizabeth's idealized royal persona. In 1607, of course, Middleton could afford a more explicit topicality; Elizabeth had been dead for some four years, and her absence from the throne allowed for more license in theatrical representation, supplying Middleton an objective correlative not so much lacking as politically unavailable in Shakespeare's play. It is in this scene that Vindice most strongly recalls Hamlet in the graveyard, but where Hamlet reinvested Yorick with flesh in his imagination—"Here hung those lips that I have kissed I know not how oft"—Vindice literalizes this process to produce a theatrically viable spectacle:

Here's an eye,
Able to tempt a great man—to serve God;
A pretty hanging lip, that has forgot now to
dissemble;
Methinks this mouth should make a swearer
tremble. …

(3.5.54-57)

Within the confines of the play, making his chaste lover the vehicle of her own revenge means subjecting her to the fate she died to avoid: she is the painted lady, the courtesan, the whore; unlike Hamlet's imagined and recollected kiss, hers will be literalized, the kiss she refused the Duke in life will be granted him in death, with Vindice playing the panderer. The ideal lover and the painted lady are one, and both are revealed to be fully male constructions: I will paint her an inch thick, for she was always destined to come to this. Vindice himself paints the woman—whether an inch, or half an inch thick—who in life was beyond the artificial shine, and his mourning for her now resolves itself into a quite conscious misogynistic regard:

And now methinks I could e'en chide myself
For doting on her beauty, though her death
Shall be reveng'd after no common action.—
Does the silkworm expend her yellow labors
For thee? for thee does she undo herself?
Are lordships sold to maintain ladyships
For the poor benefit of a bewitching minute?

(3.5.68-74)

Vindice's revenge of his dead lover has become a literal travesty of her chastity, a revenge enacted upon her in the name of mourning.

As the skull of Gloriana, the travesty extends to Elizabeth as well. During her reign, however, Elizabeth was the primary actor in the cult of Gloriana and actively appropriated Petrarchan poetics to construct the desire of her subjects. Vindice's travesty turns those poetics upon the memory of Elizabeth in a radical sense, returning her to the traditional status of the Petrarchan lady by making her so fully the object rather than the actor or subject of male desire. Gloriana is a “property” (3.5.100), a stage prop; not even the overdetermined sexuality of the boy-actor can peep through this representation of sovereign sexuality fully mastered and fully violated. The violation may not be the final act in the long process of misogynistic mourning for Elizabeth, but it is.
arguably a climactic one; the only good woman may be a dead woman in *Hamlet*, but *The Revenger's Tragedy* does not even offer this posthumous recovery. In the travesty of Gloriana, the dead queen is proved "all woman" at last, not only entered by the duke's tongue as he kisses her "like a slobbering Dutchman" (1. 62) but also possessed and mastered by Vindice, who thus proves himself all male, not at all dependent upon or in the hands of women.

But this resolution of one of patriarchy's fundamental contradictions, through such an extreme reassertion of gender difference, cannot hold either. In most revenge plays the revenger's actions gradually obscure the difference between themselves and the typically lecherous murderers they oppose, and Vindice follows suit in this regard, announcing at the end of the play that there is "one enemy left alive. … 'Tis time to die, when we are ourselves our foes" (5.3.107-8). First, however, he undoes himself by undoing the sheer differentiation between the closed body and world of men and the porous and leaky realm of womankind. At play's end he has not only succeeded in his revenge on the Duke but has also managed to produce the deaths of all the Duke's sons and much of the court as well, and has managed to make it look as though they slaughtered one another. The Duke's death has remained a mystery, but here Vindice cannot keep his mouth shut; proud of his accomplishments, he cannot keep his own secret and even squeals on his brother and sometime accomplice as well:

'Twas somewhat witty carried though we say it:
'Twas we two murder'd him.

(11. 96-97)

Although one of the people avenged by Vindice in the course of the play was the wife of the good lord Antonio, who killed herself after being raped by the Duke's youngest son, the good lord summarily orders both brothers carted off for execution. Vindice ends the play as the leaky vessel he thought to distinguish himself from, dribbling away his secret, his carefully constructed maleness, and his life.

Such a dénouement is so uncharacteristic of theatrical misogyny in the period and so explicit that it allows one to entertain, at least, the possibility that Middleton conceived this play with all its excesses not as yet another, and in many ways culminating, instance of stage misogyny but as a critique and critical examination of the tradition. Even so, the elaborate travesty of Gloriana remains one of the few things not undone in the process. Other heads brought on the Elizabethan and Jacobean stage register a visual pun, recalling the scaffold of execution by overlaying it upon the scaffold of theatrical representation; Middleton achieves an overlaid meaning no less spectacular but of a different order, by making Vindice so fully possess the skull of Gloriana—the maidenhead, according to the implicit logic of his pun, of the Virgin Queen herself.

Notes

1 *A journal of all that was accomplished by Monsieur de Maisse Ambassador in England from King Henri IV to Queen Elizabeth Anno Domini 1597*, trans, and ed. G. B. Harrison and R. A. Jones (London, 1931), 12.


3 Haigh, 166.

4 Haigh, 167.


6 "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture" in The Interpretation of Cultures (New York, 1973), 3-30, esp. 6-7.


9 For historical approaches to misogyny, see Katharine M. Rogers, The Troublesome Helpmate: A History of Misogyny in Literature (Seattle, WA, 1966); and R. Howard Bloch, Medieval Misogyny and the Invention of Western Romantic Love (Chicago, 1991). In a powerful recent essay, Valerie Wayne analyzes Renaissance misogonies as forms of "residual" ideology: oftentimes embodied in a single character who is criticized or denigrated by others, misogynistic discourse is superficially called into question at the same time it is kept alive and put to use by the dominant culture; see "Historical Differences: Misogyny and Othello" in The Matter of Difference: Materialist Feminist Criticism of Shakespeare, Valerie Wayne, ed. (Ithaca, NY, 1991), 153-80.

10 The Family, Sex and Marriage in England 1500-1800 (New York, 1977), 99. Although in other respects Stone's theory of the rise of "affective individualism" illuminates useful and suggestive ground, in the case of bereavement it only resembles a genuine history of emotion, amounting in fact to a progressive history of the present: if the past didn't feel or express itself as we do, then it must not have felt at all. For historians' critiques of Stone, see reviews by Keith Thomas, Times Literary Supplement (21 October 1977): 1227; Christopher Hill, "Sex, Marriage, and the Family in England," Economic History Review 31 (1978): 450-63, esp. 462; and David S. Berkowitz, Renaissance Quarterly 32 (1979): 396-405. Michael MacDonald also addresses the shortcomings of Stone's view when he chronicles the prevalence of bereavement among Napier's patients in Mystical Bedlam: Madness, Anxiety, and Healing in Seventeenth-Century England (Cambridge, 1981), 77-78 and 103-4.

11 Juliana Schiesari examines melancholia, grief, and misogyny in The Gendering of Melancholia: Feminism, Psychoanalysis, and the Symbolics of Loss in Renaissance Literature (Ithaca, NY, and London, 1992). In her otherwise excellent study, however, she tends to treat melancholia and mourning as if they were relatively synonymous and interchangeable terms in the sixteenth century. In addition, she fails to note that grief, in terms of both feeling and expression, was an emotion of some controversy in English Protestantism. As G. W. Pigman has shown in Grief and English Renaissance Elegy (Cambridge, 1985), grief was one of the "natural" human emotions that radical Protestants sought to reform and even eradicate from properly Christian psyches. Philosophical and religious treatises stigmatized grief as un-Christian, a sign of sinful disregard for providence, to be met not with sympathy but with hostile and even angry "consolation"; unlike the Continental material that Schiesari surveys, such efforts at ideological proscription were not focused on women alone but on all Protestants, regardless of gender.
As Pigman notes, such strictures against grief were at once short-lived and unsuccessful, but were vehement enough to suggest just the opposite of Stone's conclusion—a prevalence rather than an absence of such "un-Christian" feelings of bereavement.


For example, in 1577 a tailor from Finchingfield named William Binkes declared, "What manner of religion we have here in England I know not, for the preachers now do preach their own inventions and fantasies, and therefore I will not believe any of them" (quoted in F. G. Emmison, Elizabethan Life: Disorder [Colchester, UK, 1970], 46).


For a more extended discussion, see The Place of the Stage, 1-59.


Of course, drama was also part of print culture; those plays published, whether with or without the participation of authors and the companies who claimed exclusive acting rights to them, enjoyed circulation beyond various venues of performance, and over time as well as space (surviving publications in all their variants providing, except for a few dozen dramatic manuscripts, our only direct access to the dramatic repertory of the times).

The contemporaneous impact of the drama performed by London companies beyond its immediate audience is difficult to assess but cannot be automatically discounted. It is difficult to speak of the "national" character of any aspect of the production and circulation of knowledge in the period, and this is true of printed books as well. Plays and players traveled beyond the city both in terms of performing venues and circulation in printed form. Furthermore, audiences traveled as well, in the case of the higher social strata coming from and going to the city with some regularity. Given the fluidity of the boundary between oral and print cultures, we should assume at least some second-hand dissemination of ideas and experiences, by oral description and narration, whether deriving from plays or printed works. Elizabethan and Jacobean drama also "traveled" beyond the boundaries of England. Foreign travelers frequently remarked upon the Elizabethan stage, providing sketches of stages and playhouses and descriptions of individual plays; English companies also traveled abroad, sometimes to establish a seasonal or permanent venue. In 1600, for example, traveling English players built a replica of the Fortune theater in Gdansk, where English companies performed English plays, apparently of recent London vintage, until 1650; see Jerzy Limon, Gentlemen of a Company: English Players in Central and Eastern Europe, 1590-1660 (Cambridge, 1985).

For an excellent speculation on the significance of this shift, see Louis Adrian Montrose, "The Purpose of Playing: Reflections on a Shakespearean Anthropology," Helios, n.s. 7 (1980): 51-74.
19 On this topic, see The Place of the Stage, 88-115.

20 The Spanish Tragedy (1587), traditionally regarded as the play that initiated the subgenre on the Elizabethan stage, is almost entirely free of the misogynistic set pieces that will become a generic requirement in the next decade; the passages added to the play in 1602, however, are typically gynophobic, as in Hieronimo's remark that children merely "serve / To ballance these light creatures we call women" (ed. Charles T. Prouty [Arlington Heights, IL, 1951], 4.4.7-8).

21 This and all subsequent quotations of Hamlet follow the Arden edition, ed. Harold Jenkins (London and New York, 1982).

22 Although the play has been traditionally attributed to Cyril Tourneur, I am persuaded by recent arguments that Middleton is in fact the likely author. For a survey of the issue, see the introduction to Thomas Middleton, The Revenger's Tragedy: A Facsimile of the 1607/8 Quarto, ed. MacD. P. Jackson (Rutherford, NJ, 1983).

23 De Maise, 82.

24 I agree with Lisa Jardine that, given the immediate context, "'gorge' here surely means 'throat' rather than 'bosom'"; see her essay "'Why should he call her whore?': Deformation and Desdemona's Case" in Addressing Frank Kermode: Essays in Criticism and Interpretation, Margaret Trudeau-Clayton and Martin Warner, eds. (Urbana and Chicago, 1991), 124-53, esp. 146, n. 13. Jardine's correction, it should be noted, is based not on de Maise's text but on extracts reprinted in L. A. Prevost-Paradol, élisabeth et Henri IV (1595-1598): Ambassade de Hurault de Maise en Angleterre au sujet de la paix de Vervins (Paris, 1855), 151, n. 1.

25 De Maise, 25-26, quoted in Louis Adrian Montrose, "Shaping Fantasies: Figurations of Gender and Power in Elizabethan Culture" in Representing the English Renaissance, Stephen Greenblatt, ed. (Berkeley, 1988), 31-64, esp. 33-34. I am deeply indebted to this essay for initially drawing my attention to de Maise's Journal.

26 Quoted in Prevost-Paradol, 155, n. 2. Jardine suggests that in this instance such "gestures of revealing" may expose a stomacher rather than flesh itself (147, n. 14).

27 De Maise, 36-37.

28 Montrose, "Shaping Fantasies," 34. In the essay cited in note 24 above, Lisa Jardine suggests that the air of erotic provocation stems not from Elizabeth's behavior but from de Maise's text alone: "The 'erotic provocation' belongs … to the text … not to the event (that is, to any of the Queen's many public appearances)." In a footnote, however, she shifts the blame to Harrison and Jones as translators: "In fact, it turns out to belong to the twentieth-century English translation … far more than to the original French" (130 and 147, n. 15 [my emphasis]). Jardine forgets here that she has not consulted the "original French" either, but this is a minor problem in relation to the other questions raised by her assertions.

Having corrected one translation of gorge as "bosom" when the context clearly requires "throat" (see note 24, above), Jardine seems to imply that all references to an exposed bosom or to Elizabeth's repeated gestures with her clothing—opening an outer robe to reveal whatever lies beneath—are also called into question. Such details are, however, quite explicit in the Prevost-Paradol extracts. She also assigns a number of psychological attributes to de Maise (when blaming erotic provocation on him rather than on Harrison and Jones) for which there is no textual support. Although she asserts that we should "take note of Hurault de Maise's difficulty with the breach of decorum (in his terms) of a woman of Elizabeth's age receiving him with anything other than a gown which entirely concealed her body" (147, n. 15 [my emphasis]), she cites no evidence of such a
difficulty; the terms, as far as I can see, are hers rather than de Maisse's. Jardine says that de Maisse responds in "unseemly terms" (131) to this "breach"; I can find no "unseemly terms" in his account, and Jardine cites none. She says that a "preoccupation with visible flesh" (131) shapes de Maisse's description (contradicting, by the way, her assertion that this is largely the mistranslation of Harrison and Jones); but de Maisse is preoccupied with all details of Elizabeth's appearance and behavior in his audiences with her (hence the oftentimes confusing welter of detail about her clothing, even when, as in the fourth audience, she is wearing a high-necked gown revealing no flesh below her chin). Jardine asserts that the richness of Elizabeth's dress "reinforces [de Maisse]'s anxiety about 'whoredom'" (130), for which she cites German and Italian associations of finery with prostitution—but nothing from de Maisse that supports such an association in the context of his diary or his attitude toward a monarch.

I dwell on these points because the claims and assumptions of Jardine's essay can easily seem (as they did on my own first reading) to be more firmly grounded in a sound textual basis than is in fact the case. On careful review I find both her representation of de Maisse and the use she puts it to—a critique of Louis Montrose's reading of the Journal—both problematic and curiously overdetermined.

29 Quoted from Harold Jenkins's Arden edition of Hamlet, 554.

30 The Queen's Two Bodies: Drama and the Elizabethan Succession (London, 1977), 12, with Axton's italics removed.


34 Calendar of the Manuscripts of ... The Marquis of Salisbury, 18 vols. (London, 1904), 10:172-73, quoted from Montrose, "Shaping Fantasies," 54. Waad refers to previous correspondence with Cecil concerning Edwardes which does not appear in the Calendar, and which I have been thus far unable to locate.


Curiously, Francis Barker takes Hamlet at his word and regards his claim to have "that within which passes show" as an early or premature gesture toward a "deep" subjectivity of the kind that will be produced in the bourgeois individual of a later age; see Barker's comments on this scene in The Tremulous Private Body: Essays on Subjection (London and New York, 1984), 35-37.


"The remarrying widow: a stereotype reconsidered" in Women in English Society 1500-1800, Mary Prior, ed. (London and New York, 1985), 54-92, esp. 55. Todd's excellent study also provides a context for Shakespeare's will, with the specific disposition of his "second-best bed" to his widow, as well as for the Player Queen's remarks on remarriage. In his Advice to a Son, Raleigh felt called on to stipulate that "if {thy wife} love again let her not enjoy her second love in the same bed wherein she loved thee" (quoted from Todd, 73). Hamlet Jr.'s emphasis on Gertrude's "incestuous sheets" and Hamlet Sr.'s remarks on the "royal bed of Denmark" suggest that the untimeliness of the king's death was an outrage because it prevented him from setting his estate as well as his soul in order, by drawing up a properly patriarchal will—one that would have deprived Gertrude of the "royal" and presumably best bed.


Pigman, 2. See note 11, above.

Quoted from Pigman, 1.

Arthur Kirsch, for example, attempts to register the emotional undercurrents of Hamlet's plight in 1.2 by invoking a universal, transhistorical commonsense: "What a person who is grieving needs, of course, is not the consolation of words, even words which are true, but sympathy" ("Hamlet's Grief," ELH 48 [1982]: 17-36, esp. 20). Neither sympathy nor even the "consolation of words" was the prescribed attitude toward grief in the
period; Kirsch's "of course" lodges his comment in a world quite removed from that of Hamlet.

47 Michael MacDonald's study of the incidence of unresolved bereavement among Napier's patients would seem to support such speculation; see Mystical Bedlam, 103-4 and 158-60.


49 David Hunt, Parents and Children in History: The Psychology of Family Life in Early Modern France (New York and London, 1970), 183. On the skirted gowns worn by children of both sexes and the "breeching" age, see Phillis Cunnington and Anne Buck, Children's Costume in England: From the Fourteenth to the end of the Nineteenth Century (New York, 1965), 38, 52, 54, and 71; and Philippe Ariès, Centuries of Childhood, trans. Robert Balick (London, 1962), 57-58. Ariès asks of this practice a slightly misleading question: "Why, in order to distinguish the boy from the man, was he made to look like the girl who was not distinguished from the woman?" (58). The girl was, first of all, distinguished from the woman, her costume shifting to adult style at around the same age; what is more, we do not know enough to assume that boys in skirts "looked like … girl[s]" to early modern eyes. Despite what registers as extreme effeminacy to us (see, for instance, the portraits of Charles I's sons in Cunnington and Buck), we presume too much when we assume we know how the costume was gendered—female, male, androgynous, or neuter. How the practice relates to Renaissance single-sex theories also remains to be answered but may be a relevant issue.

On the significance of children's clothing, I am also indebted to discussions with Amanda Bailey and the extensive research she has conducted for the dissertation she is writing, titled "London is Burning: Sartorial Signification On and Off the Early Modern Stage."

50 Quotations of Shakespeare plays other than Hamlet follow the Riverside Shakespeare, ed. G. Blakemore Evans (Boston, 1974).


53 For the nineteenth-century invention of homosexuality, see especially David M. Halperin, One Hundred Years of Homosexuality: And Other Essays on Greek Love (New York, 1990). For a recent and subtle revision of Halperin relevant to Renaissance constructions of sexuality, see Jonathan Goldberg, Sodometries: Renaissance Texts, Modern Sexualities (Stanford, 1992).

54 Adelman, Suffocating Mothers, 130-46.

55 Illongot males, for example, process loss and rage by headhunting, participating in a psychic ritual that apparently succeeds (at least for Illongot males) in purging both grief and rage; see Renato I. Rosaldo in Bruner, ed., 178-95. On the cultural specificity of even so apparently universal an emotion as anger, see Robert C. Solomon, "Getting angry: the Jamesian theory of emotion in anthropology" in Shweder and Levine,
Let us imagine a Renaissance neostoic, such as Sir William Cornwallis the Younger, or Philippe de Mornay, or Joseph Hall, watching an early performance of *Hamlet* at the Globe sometime between 1599 and 1602. Mornay would be on an embassy from France, busy about promoting the interests of the Protestant cause and perhaps his Calvinist disposition would keep him away from the theater, but then again the memory of his good friend Sir Philip Sidney, who had a taste for Senecan tragedy, might influence him to attend. Joseph Hall, who had only recently given up the writing of Juvenalian formal verse satire and was about to enter the Anglican Church, might have had similar Calvinistic scruples. Sir William Cornwallis, whose essays are full of Shakespearean echoes, would have had no such scruples and probably did attend it, perhaps in company with his friend John Donne.

The Neostoic playgoer would certainly recognize the familiar outline of the model that emerges from Seneca's moral writings, the sage. He would perhaps discern part of it in the "To be, or not to be" (III. i. 55-88)1 soliloquy as Hamlet considers the option of passively enduring the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune. He would certainly recognize it fully sketched out in the encomium on Horatio (III. ii. 63-72). It would, presumably, be gratifying to the moral sense of this playgoer to watch Hamlet progress from envy and admiration for the Stoic ideal to the Stoic faith he expresses in the final scene. Hearing "the readiness is all," he might reasonably conclude that Hamlet's *anagnorisis* has led him to Christian Stoic faith. Cornwallis might turn to Donne and quote from Seneca's *De Providentia* as a kind of summation: "What is the duty of a. good man? To offer himself to Fate."

Donne might nod thoughtfully in reply, but it is doubtful whether he would agree that the tragedy's meaning could be reduced to this. For he would have been unable to miss the skepticism implicit in the dramatic contexts within which Hamlet utters Stoic commonplaces and expresses his admiration for the Stoic ideal. As the author of the skeptical *Satire III*, and one for whom the new philosophy put all in doubt, he would
certainly perceive that Hamlet's expressions of Stoic faith in the last scene do not fully answer the questions he has raised in earlier meditations, especially in the "To be, or not to be" soliloquy. He might also point out that not all the spokesmen for Stoicism in the play are trustworthy.

Stoic perfectionism is first introduced in the play as a viable ideal by Claudius, who represents himself in his address to the court as a ruler-sage whose reason has enabled him to order his own passions and those of his queen and subjects with "discretion." He projects the Stoic ideal again moments later when he reproves Hamlet for exhibiting "unmanly grief and failing to accept the will of heaven with a properly disposed heart and mind:

Take it to heart? Fie! 'tis a fault to heaven,
A fault against the dead, a fault to nature,
To reason most absurd, . . .

(I. ii. 100-2)

As Robert Miola points out, Claudius is a perversion of the Stoic model: "His reason serves his passion instead of checking it and degenerates into mere trickery. The Stoic watchwords—'reason', 'thinking', and 'judgement'—echo in various forms in his speech, ironic reminders of the ideal and witnesses to its perversion."

The type of Stoicism Claudius enjoins is an avenue of retreat from political activism, emphasizing passivity, acceptance, and the cultivation of apatheia. Its defining quality is constancy, maintained by the practice of two of the cardinal virtues, temperance, and fortitude, and manifesting itself in heroic endurance rather than the performance of great deeds. In his De Constantia Sapientis, Seneca exalts Cato above more active heroes, defending his assertion "that in Cato the immortal gods had given us a truer exemplar of the wise man than earlier ages had in Ulysses and Hercules." Renaissance Neostoics who rejected the active life could justify escaping its pressures and corrupting effects by maintaining a view of Stoic cosmopolitanism that relieved them of allegiance to governments or states and enjoined passive acceptance of the existing social order and whatever it imposed. Justus Lipsius is representative of this type of Neostoicism. His De Constantia urges the wise man to withdraw from courts and cities into rustic seclusion. Any attempt to change or reform society will destroy constancy. Claudius compels Hamlet to remain in his court, but tries to persuade him to embrace a Stoic constancy that amounts to passivity.

A very different kind of Stoicism, enjoining participation and service, is set forth by Guillaume Du Vair in his La Philosophie Morale des Stoiques. Du Vair is in the activist tradition of Cicero and Marcus Aurelius, while Lipsius follows Seneca and Boethius in advocating withdrawal from the world to facilitate the rational practice of virtue. Activist Neostoicism was also represented in Shakespeare's time, as I noted earlier, by Calvinists, such as Mornay, Hall, and La Primaudaye, who linked self-knowledge, knowledge of the divine, and duty to one's fellows. The concept of moral stewardship, generally regarded as a Calvinist notion with scriptural roots, could find support in the writings of the ancient Stoics, such as Epictetus, whose ideas in this regard are dramatized by Marston and Chapman. The emphasis on discipline and a sense of responsibility for the moral welfare of the community that gave Stoicism virtually the status of a state religion in ancient Rome also recommended it to Calvin and his followers. The point is relevant to a discussion of Hamlet because the prince himself progresses in the course of the play from a yearning to assume a passive Stoic stance to an activism that combines Stoic and Calvinist elements.

Shakespeare's treatments of Stoicism in other plays reveal both of these strains of the philosophy as potentially conducive to moral confusion. In Julius Caesar, he seems to be targeting Stoic activism, mainly, as I suggested earlier, the assumption, later dramatized by Chapman in The Revenge of Bussy D'Ambois, that a good man uncorrupted by passion can reconcile any task he perceives to be necessary with a correct moral
purpose. In *Troilus and Cressida*, he represents the other type of Stoicism in Agamemnon. Addressing his lieutenants in the Greek council of war (I. iii.), Agamemnon enjoins "persistent constancy" and urges them to accept their frustrations as "naught else / But the protractive trials of great Jove" (I. iii. 19-20). By urging Stoic acceptance, he glosses over the fact that he really doesn't understand why the siege has failed. It remains for Ulysses, a politician and a realist, to exercise his *virtù* and, having identified the problem, to formulate a plan. What the activist *virtus* of Brutus and the passive *virtus* of Agamemnon have in common is a reliance upon reason that proves to be not merely unreliable but totally deceptive. One recalls Montaigne's definition of reason as man's capacity to delude himself:

> I alwaies call reason that apparance or shew of discourses which every man deviseth or forgeth in himselfe: that reason of whose condition there may be a hundred, one contrary to another, about one selfe same subject: it is an instrument of lead and wax, stretching, pliable, and that may be fitted to all byases and squared to all measures: there remaines nothing but the skill and sufficiency to know how to turne and winde the same.

In an important recent article, Mark Matheson points out how Hamlet "passes beyond" a reliance on reason and relinquishes himself to the direction of his conscience, a transition which, Matheson argues, parallels that of contemporary Protestantism from the traditional Christian-humanist ideology, recently restated by Hooker, to "a new cultural paradigm, one in which a Protestant concept of conscience supplants reason as the crucial human faculty." In Matheson's view, Stoicism and humanism are failing ideologies in the world of the play.

Matheson's argument is persuasive, but the play reflects as well Protestant, specifically Calvinist, adaptations of Stoicism. Hamlet's speeches in the final act express, to use Gordon Braden's words, "a Stoicism Christianized by an unclassically thorough humility before a greater power," a philosophical stance closer to Montaigne than Seneca. Moreover, the skepticism as well as the fideism of Montaigne is clearly reflected in the last scenes. This does not really contradict Matheson's argument, or Braden's, because, as noted earlier, Montaigne and Calvin have much the same view of *recta ratio* and its limitations.

The attitude of Hamlet toward Stoicism and its embodiment in the sage is obviously ambivalent. On the one hand, he admires Horatio and envies his freedom from destructive passion, his *apatheia*. On the other, he is acutely aware of the limitations of Stoic rationalism. When he tells Horatio that there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in his philosophy, he is apparently referring to the limitations of natural philosophy in general and Horatio's Stoic rationalism in particular. Horatio's reputation as a "scholar" had prompted Bernardo and Marcellus to seek his verification of the apparition they saw on the battlements. With the confidence of an academic natural philosopher and a rationalist whose learning has not been tested beyond the confines of Wittenberg University, Horatio had "explained" the Ghost as a figment of their "fantasy" before he even saw it. The explanation is obviously inadequate but no more so than the numerous attempts by Shakespearean scholar-critics to "explain" the Ghost in terms of ideas and commonplace notions that were current in Shakespeare's time. Like the motives of Iago, the more it is explained the more elusive it becomes. Hamlet's remark to Horatio alerts the audience to the danger of relying on learning that is insufficiently based on experience in a world that challenges Stoic faith in its underlying all-permeating reason.

In his "To be, or not to be" soliloquy, Hamlet in effect juxtaposes Stoic *virtus* and Machiavellian *virtù*. Passively enduring the blows of fortune and actively committing one's energies to mastering her are alternative responses that appear to be very different from each other. What they have in common is an adherence to purpose, the moral purpose of the sage and the political or military purpose of the man of action. Identifying the latter with Machiavellian *virtù*, rather than activist *virtus*, may not be wholly justified by the text but is, nonetheless, tempting because Shakespeare sets up the same juxtaposition, though in a different manner, in *Troilus and Cressida*, a play written soon after *Hamlet*, which exhibits some close affinities.
As noted earlier, Agamemnon is a Stoic sage, and his address to his lieutenants in the Greek council of war scene is a distillation of the main ideas in Seneca's *De Constantia Sapientis*. As a way of glossing over his own ignorance of the reasons why the Greek siege has failed, Agamemnon urges his lieutenants to manifest Stoic *virtus*. After Nestor attempts to "apply" Agamemnon's words, Ulysses utters his great speech on degree and order, whereby he attempts to draw Agamemnon out of his Stoic retreat into an assertion of leadership. His speech appeals to commonly held beliefs in the moral necessity of reverence for degree, but its purpose is thoroughly pragmatic. The obvious reason why he wants Agamemnon's authority reestablished is that Agamemnon is willing to let Ulysses do most of his thinking for him. Yet, in fact, Ulysses exerts no control whatever over the major events of the play. In terms of achieving concrete ends, he is as ineffectual as his commander, and the "policy" he practices, as Thersites remarks, "grows into an ill opinion" (V. iv. 8-16).

Indeed the development of *Troilus and Cressida* as a whole illustrates Hamlet's point in the first five lines of "To be, or not to be," that Stoic resignation and commitment to action are equally futile courses. To take arms against a sea of troubles is to beat back the tide with a broom, yet, paradoxically, one may indeed "end them" for oneself if one could, by opposing them, achieve self-annihilation.

The key phrase in the soliloquy is "nobler in the mind." Even as he juxtaposes being and not-being and two opposed modes of adhering to purpose, Hamlet is also in effect juxtaposing subjective and objective reality and giving primacy to the former. The real question is not one of whether, in fact, passive endurance is a nobler course than active commitment but how the mind perceives the alternatives. Paradoxically, though his subjective stance appears to reduce Stoic *virtus* and *virtù* to the same level of futility, it is, in fact, in harmony with what Gordon Braden has called "the logic of Stoic retreat." The external world is utterly devalued against the reality of the inner world, the judging self, the realm of *autarceia*, yet curiously this devaluing does not lead to any sort of affirmation of self-sufficiency. It leads instead, as Hamlet's soliloquy reveals, to a longing for the ultimate retreat—annihilation. Hamlet had expressed the same longing in an earlier soliloquy: "O that this too too sullied flesh would melt / Thaw, and resolve itself into a dew!" (I. ii. 129-30). In that soliloquy, too, he expresses Christian scruples about suicide, but as "To be, or not to be" reveals, they are based mainly on the fear that suicide will not lead to annihilation, that the burden of consciousness will continue in the next world.

Classical Stoic philosophy has little to say about "The undiscover'd country." Marcus Aurelius leaves open the question of whether or not there is an afterlife. The Stoic eschatology presented in *The Aeneid* by Anchises (VI. 718-48) seems to express a belief that the divine spark lives on and presumably, after "nothing is left but pure / Ethereal sentence and the spirit's essential flame," it is destined for reunion with the *Logos spermatikos*. Seneca is inconsistent on the subject, but Braden seems to be right in attaching greater significance to those passages in which he in effect denies the soul's immortality than those in which he seems to affirm it. Again, Hamlet's sense of the limitations of Stoic natural philosophy is apparent. Among the things not dreamt of in natural philosophy is the whole realm of Christian eschatology, but the fact that Hamlet refers to this too as a "dream" emphasizes the extent of his own uncertainty. His superiority to the sage in understanding is, like the unmatched wisdom of Socrates, based on his superior awareness of what he does not know.

"To be, or not to be" may be fruitfully compared with Hieronimo's "*Vindicta mihi*" soliloquy in *The Spanish Tragedy* (III. xiii. 1-44) on which it may have been at least partly modeled. Like Hamlet, Hieronimo considers alternative responses to his situation—Christian patience or Stoic resignation versus active commitment against a sea of troubles. Like Hamlet's soliloquy, his speech reveals his growing awareness of the inadequacy of the conventional views of experience represented by these alternatives. By the end of *The Spanish Tragedy* Hieronimo is made to see what Hamlet intufts at the outset of his tragedy, that there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamed of in anyone's "philosophy." Hieronimo, like Hamlet, is able to consider the alternatives critically, but, unlike Hamlet, he finds one acceptable and resolves to act: "And death's the worst of resolution" (III. xiii. 9). Hamlet's reflections are finally inconclusive and "resolution" is "sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought." Hearing the soliloquy, Donne might remark to Cornwallis that a skeptic's
meditations are always inconclusive.

For all his uncertainty, Hamlet is preoccupied with eschatology, mainly damnation, throughout much of the play, and he seems to have an unwavering emotional conviction of the reality of hell. The visitation of his father's spirit, contradicting his view that "no traveller returns" from the world beyond, evokes the literally unspeakable horrors of a purgatory that sounds more like Dante's infernal pit. Remembering this, he finds a ready excuse to put off killing Claudius at prayer. When he forges the letter dooming Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, he, in effect, wills their damnation as well by adding the phrase, "not shriving-time allow'd." He apparently maintains a Catholic belief in salvation in articulo mortis, which, along with purgatory itself, was denied by Protestant moral theology.\textsuperscript{13}

His fear of being damned himself appears not merely in his scruples about suicide but in the meditation on corruption he utters just before his first encounter with the Ghost. Beginning with a discourse on Danish drunkenness and how it adds a "swinish phrase" to the name of Dane, he parallels the soiling of a national reputation with that of individuals by some inborn flaw or "mole of nature." No matter how virtuous or gifted an individual may be, he is doomed to disgrace by "the stamp of one defect":

\begin{verbatim}
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. The dram of evil
Doth all the noble substance often dout
To his own scandal.
\end{verbatim}

(I. iv. 32-38)

The explicit concern is public opinion, as it affects both nations and individuals, identifying them with a single flaw.\textsuperscript{14} But as is typical with Hamlet, such a meditation prompts introspection, and as Olivier sensed, he seems to be thinking of how not merely reputation but moral character, his own in particular, may be affected by a single inborn defect. Bearing in mind his preoccupation with eschatology, it is tempting to find in "the general censure" an ambiguous reference to both public judgment and the General Judgment.

If we choose to see an eschatological reference in these lines, we may see as well the beginning of a tension between the unambiguously Catholic eschatology shortly to be revealed in the Ghost's speeches, which stress the importance of the sacraments to salvation, and what appears to be an eschatology more in harmony with that of Luther and Calvin. Without referring specifically to predestination, Hamlet seems to be describing how some otherwise blameless individuals are damned, as well as disgraced, by a "vicious mole" that has been imposed on them by nature.

One should not, of course, make too much of a possible ambiguity, but it can't be denied that Hamlet feels victimized by providence:

\begin{verbatim}
The time is out of joint. O cursed spite,
That ever I was born to set it right.
\end{verbatim}

(I. v. 196-97)

\begin{verbatim}
For this same lord
I do repent; but heaven hath pleas'd it so,
To punish me with this and this with me,
\end{verbatim}
That I must be their scourge and minister.

(III. iv. 174-77)

The latter speech, uttered over the slain Polonius, can be read as a bitter acceptance of the damnable role of scourge that has been imposed on him. As conventionally conceived, the role of scourge and the role of minister are very different from each other and do not coexist in the same actor. A scourge is a damned instrument of divine justice whose fitness for a damnable role is due to a corruption for which providence is not to blame. A minister is a benevolent agent of divine justice who may complete the work begun by a scourge, but the two agents are very different in kind. In seeing himself as one coerced into assuming both roles, Hamlet is clearly rejecting any Christian or Stoic notion of providence as benevolent design. It is perhaps his most profoundly skeptical moment in the play. In musing on the battlement, he had spoken of those who are victimized by nature, disgraced, and perhaps damned as a result of something "wherein they are not guilty." Now he describes himself as one victimized by heaven into assuming a role that will damn him.

Referring to eschatology in the world of the play, specifically what he sees as the "moral barbarism" of the premise that a good man unlucky enough to die without receiving the last sacraments must suffer hellish or purgatorial fires, Graham Bradshaw observes, "Divine justice would appear to have the morals of a fruit machine; but for much of the play this barbaric idea seems to function as a premise." From a purely human standpoint, this would seem to be the case, even as it is clearly the case in The Spanish Tragedy. In that play, as I have argued, Kyd deliberately emphasizes the discrepancy between the orthodox Christian Stoic beliefs expressed by the living characters with regard to the process of divine justice and what is revealed in the judgment scenes that frame the main plot. The play begins and ends skeptically with eschatological revelations that in no way agree with or fulfill the orthodox Christian assumptions or expectations of the characters who live and die in the intervening acts. In Hamlet, too, divine justice seems to be at odds with human reason and morality. But Shakespeare's tragic design is more encompassing than is Kyd's. The tragic vision of The Spanish Tragedy is like that of Job without the theophany. Hamlet does not include a theophany as such, but it includes elements that must have been extremely suggestive to an audience consisting largely of Protestants attuned to religious discourse in which the mystery of divine justice was an awe-inspiring matter beyond the application, let alone comprehension, of such crude instruments as human reason and moral judgment.

In an essay cited earlier in this study, Paul R. Sellin begins his discussion of Reformation awe by focusing on Everyman as an expression of the medieval Catholic theology about to be displaced by the Reformation in the very countries in which the play was especially popular—Germany, the Low Countries, and England. As Sellin observes, "Everyman exhibits a great deal of sureness about how God relates to man. The benevolence of divine concern for all humankind is assumed, and the means by which man can ensure the certainty of enjoying grace are relatively precise, systematic, and reliable." Everyman exercises all his faculties, including knowledge and free choice, in preparing himself for death. He receives the sacraments of Penance, the Eucharist, and Extreme Unction, the bountiful means provided by God Himself through His Church of obtaining grace.

In stark contrast to this dramatic representation of how God relates to man is the vision of the Reformers. For Luther, "God is a terrible and glorious, though to be sure an infinitely loving and bountiful, mystery whose omnipotence is eternal, incomprehensible, inscrutable, infallible, immense, awesome and above all hidden—verè a Deus absconditus (Isa. 45: 15)" In the matter of His justice, Luther acknowledges that the palpable injustice in the world is a challenge to faith and that reason will lead man to impious conclusions:

Behold! God governs the external affairs of the world in such a way that, if you regard and follow the judgment of human reason, you are forced to say, either that there is no God, or that God is unjust; as the poet said: "I am often tempted to think there are no gods." See the
great prosperity of the wicked, and by contrast the great adversity of the good. . . Is it not, pray, universally held to be most unjust that bad men should prosper, and good men afflicted? Yet that is the way of the world.\textsuperscript{19}

\ldots Luther condemned Skepticism, believing that conscience informed by the reading of Scripture would lead one to certainty in religious matters, but his extreme anti-rationalism, his utter contempt for reason as the malleable "whore of the devil," is essentially in harmony with Montaigne's Skeptical view of reason's unreliability. And Calvin, who adapts so much Stoicism into his moral philosophy, has no faith in \textit{recta ratio} as a guide to righteousness. Like Luther, he takes Augustine's interpretations of Paul's teachings concerning the state of fallen man to deterministic extremes. While the natural faculties of fallen man—understanding, judgment, and will—have been corrupted, he possesses enough reason, a vestige of his prelapsarian state, to seek the truth. But unaided reason cannot overcome the debilitating effects of vanity and sin, and since the will is inseparable from reason, it too is in bondage to vanity and sin.\textsuperscript{20} Like Luther, he stresses the inadequacy of human judgment applied to divine justice:

First, therefore, this fact should occur to us: that our discourse is concerned with the justice not of a human court but of a heavenly tribunal, lest we measure by our own small measure the integrity of works needed to satisfy the divine judgment. Yet it is amazing with what great rashness and boldness this is commonly defined.\textsuperscript{21}

When Hamlet sees himself as one victimized by heaven, he is following the judgment of his human reason to an impious conclusion. Only when he comes to realize the futility of applying his reason to apprehend the design of his fate will he be able to relinquish himself to the will of heaven. This realization comes about mainly as a result of his adventure at sea, during which he is preserved by a combination of rashness and what he sees as special providence, but that voyage is preceded by a meditation in which reason, as in \textit{The Apology of Raymond Sebond}, completely discredits itself. Throughout the play, it has become progressively more apparent that introspection has led him not to the self-knowledge that should be the basis of virtuous activity but instead into a Montaigne\'s \textit{profond labyrinthe} in which he moves ever further from an understanding of his own motives and, therefore, ever further from commitment to action. He is paralyzed by self-awareness, and the Stoic commonplace that self-knowledge leads to virtuous activity is obviously thrown into question.

In his final soliloquy, shamed by the example of Fortinbras marching his troops to battle for a worthless piece of Polish territory, Hamlet castigates himself for his failure to act. His reason and his blood concur in urging him to revenge. Moreover, honor is at stake. What is remarkable about this speech is that it contains so many self-contradictions and yet is, as Graham Bradshaw remarks, "remarkably coherent."\textsuperscript{22}

When the Norwegian captain tells Hamlet how worthless the prize is and yet how costly in potential casualties, Hamlet's initial response is amazement at the absurdity of such extravagant waste, yet he understands how such wars occur. They are the ulcerous results of extended peace and prosperity. They break out without any discernible cause, but the effects are, nonetheless, fatal. As Kittredge notes, he is restating an old theory that war is the natural exercise of the body politic, and without it the national character is subject to deterioration analogous to that which idleness and luxury cause in the human body.\textsuperscript{23} Hamlet's restatement of this old theory does not, however, include any reference to the healthful effects of such exercise on the national character. As with the ulcer hidden within, the only discernible effect is that "the man dies." And what astonishes him is that such a terrible price will be paid for "this straw."

But having said this, he goes on to reflect upon how this piece of rash dreadful folly rebukes him personally for his inaction. Again he raises the great question, "What is a man . . . ?" He has no doubt that what sets man apart from beasts is the exercise of his godlike reason, and he rebukes himself for abusing his own reason to justify what he suspects is more cowardice than wisdom. But then he expresses his envy and admiration of Fortinbras, who has mindlessly committed himself and his army to mortal danger "even for an eggshell."
According to the principle he has just stated, that man functions qua man when he exercises reason, Fortinbras is behaving in a subhuman fashion. But Hamlet is, nonetheless, compelled to admire this rash young adventurer because he is willing to risk everything for the sake of honor.

Rightly to be great
Is not to stir without great argument,
But greatly to find quarrel in a straw
When honour's at the stake.

(IV. iv. 53-56)

Honor magnifies any cause, even a "straw." The idea that a great man will not stir without great cause goes back to the model of the great-spirited man in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, as does the idea that honor compels action when it is threatened. But Hamlet is carrying this latter principle a step further to justify the kind of mindset represented by Hotspur or Troilus. Bradshaw relates this passage to the Trojan debate in *Troilus and Cressida*, specifically to Troilus's question, "What's aught but as 'tis valued?" and Hector's response that "value dwells not in particular will." Indeed Hamlet articulates Troilus's whole view of honor, including his assumption that the involvement of national honor guarantees that any quarrel is honorable. Cassandra's

... brain-sick raptures
Cannot distaste the goodness of a quarrel
Which hath our several honors all engaged
To make it gracious.

(II. ii. 123-26)

While Hamlet can sympathize with such a commitment to honor, he still maintains a full rational awareness of its insanity. Hesitating to take hostile action unless there is adequate cause implies rational deliberation, but if honor is involved the trivial becomes great and reason is irrelevant. Again the cause of Fortinbras is referred to as a "straw." But while honor can magnify a "straw" and make it, to use Troilus's phrase, a theme of honor and renown, honor itself is completely without substance, "a fantasy and trick of fame." Inspired by this illusion, thousands will fall, and their example shames him. He is shamed by his inability to act according to either the imperative of reason or the irrational imperative of honor, even though his cause, unlike that of Fortinbras, is sanctioned by reason as well as honor that is no illusion. And the precise cause of his paralysis eludes him.

Of course, at this particular moment he is hardly in a position to act. Guarded by Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and the rest of his escort, he no longer possesses either strength or means. He has forgone the perfect opportunity to take revenge and the likelihood of his having another seems remote. His final bloodthirsty flourish is an expression of frustrated impotence, as meaningless as the ranting for which he condemned himself in his second soliloquy. Once again he has unpacked his heart with words to no end.

As many have noted, Shakespeare seems to have been reading Montaigne when he wrote this play. Florio's translation had not yet appeared, but he could have been reading it in manuscript or in the original, and Anthony Burgess may be right in suggesting that he was writing about "a Montaigne-like man." *Hamlet* is full of Montaignean echoes. The soliloquy I have been discussing, for instance, seems to echo Montaigne's contradictory views of war. On the one hand, he can speak of soldiering as a "profession or exercise, both noble in execution (for the strongest, most generous and provdest of all vertues, is true valour) and noble in it's cause." On the other, he can scoff at the stupidity of seeking glory in war: "So many names, so many victories, and so many conquests buried in darke oblivion, makes the hope to perpetuate our names but
ridiculous, by the surprising of ten Argo-lettiers, or of a small cottage, which is knowne but by his fall.” And Hamlet's progress toward the Christian-Stoic fideism he expresses in the last act parallels The Apology of Raymond Sebond in many respects. Like Montaigne, Hamlet discovers the futility of relying on reason, which, as this soliloquy demonstrates, cannot refute the irrational imperative of a mindless appetite for military glory and is incapable by itself of moving one to take action in a just cause. In his first bitter soliloquy he condemns his mother's behavior as less seemly than that of "a beast that wants discourse of reason." His assumption, restated in the last soliloquy, is that it is reason that sets man above the beasts. But by exalting Fortinbras he is clearly jettisoning that assumption and putting the so-called rational and the irrational on a level, much as Montaigne does in The Apology when he presents his disturbingly persuasive argument that, viewed empirically, man is neither morally nor intellectually superior to other beasts. It is a profoundly humbling moment for Hamlet but essential to his progress toward a Montaignean recognition of man's need for God, without whom man is morally no better, is indeed worse, than a beast.

Though Montaigne was a devout Catholic who used Skepticism to support fideism and a complete submission to the teaching authority of the Catholic Church, he was, as noted earlier, in fundamental agreement with Luther and Calvin regarding the limitations of human reason and man's need for grace. What Hamlet reveals, among other things, is how Skepticism may prepare one for faith, contrary to the assumptions of the Reformers. Which is not to say that the play contradicts basic Protestant doctrine concerning the necessity of total submission to the divine will and the mysterious nature of the relationship between God and man. For Hamlet, as for Job, skeptical questioning that undercuts conventional assumptions and canned wisdom finally refutes itself and prepares the way for faith and acceptance.

Matheson rightly emphasizes "the emergence of a specifically Protestant discourse and of God's predestinating will" in the final act. When Horatio expresses some shock at the fate of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, Hamlet dismisses them as "not near my conscience." Since they had already damned themselves by willfully serving evil, he feels no guilt in having merely accelerated their inevitable progress into hell. His next speech to Horatio again emphasizes that he is at peace with his conscience and is indeed being directed by it in purging the state of Denmark. To refuse its mandate would be damnable:

Does it not, think thee, stand me now upon—
He that hath kill'd my king and whor'd my mother,
Popp'd in between th' election and my hopes,
Thrown out his angle for my proper life
And with such coz'nage—is't not perfect conscience
To quit him with this arm? And is't not to be damn'd
To let this canker of our nature come
In further evil?

(V. ii. 63-70)

Thus Hamlet reveals that he has relinquished himself to the direction of God's voice within him. The Calvinist implications are unmistakable. As William Perkins wrote a few years before the play was first presented, conscience

is (as it were) a little God setting in the middle of mens hearts, arraigning them in this life as they shall be arraigned for their offences at the Tribunal seat of the everliving God in the day of judgement. Wherefore the temporarie judgement that is given by the conscience is nothing els but a beginning, or a fore-runner of the last judgement.

This is not to say that Hamlet has undergone a conversion to Calvinism during his adventure at sea. What he has discovered is the futility of opposing the divinity that shapes our ends and a consequent willingness to
relinquish himself to it. As Jenkins and others have noted, his speech to Horatio assuring him of special providence echoes both Matthew x. 29 and Calvin, who emphasized special providence. It also echoes the Stoic beliefs of Horatio.

Horatio does not utter Stoic precepts, like Chapman's Clermont D'Ambois or Marston's Pandulpho, but his self-characterization as more an antique Roman than a Dane and Hamlet's encomium defining him as an embodiment of Stoic perfection make clear the attitudes and beliefs he represents. When Hamlet says "There's a divinity that shapes our ends," Horatio recognizes an expression of his own faith as a Christian Stoic and responds, "That is most certain." Considering the extent to which Stoicism had been baptized by Calvinist Reformers, it is hardly surprising to find both Calvinist and Stoic resonances in a speech expressing total submission to providential design. While Calvin, in effect, replaced the Stoic concepts of recta ratio and the divine spark with his doctrine of Divine Illumination from within by the Holy Spirit, his followers in England, such as Perkins, maintained a view of the moral faculty as a divine agency within man, and the writings of other Protestant authors, such as Mornay and La Primaudaye, suggest that they incorporated the concept of the divine spark and identified it with the part of conscience dictating general principles. The context of Hamlet's expressions of faith in the direction of his conscience must have been especially meaningful to an audience aware of the potential conflict between believers in the sovereignty of conscience and absolutist monarchs. The Protestant view of conscience as God within man, which found classical support in the doctrine of the spark, was an important doctrinal basis for resistance to absolutism and indeed tyranny in any form, and the tensions that would lead to the outbreak of civil war in the next century were already evident in the 1590s. Appropriately, Hamlet is being prompted by his conscience as he opposes a usurping tyrant.

Hamlet's acquired faith in special providence enables him to assume briefly the role of Stoic sage that he had idealized in his encomium on Horatio. It is not the role of passive Stoic that he had considered as an alternative in "To be, or not to be," but that of an activist ready to encounter evil and overcome it with guidance from within. A yearning for retreat from the pressures of the world into a subjective realm of reality has been replaced by an inner direction to change his world. Significantly, it is Horatio, not Hamlet, who exhibits anxiety about the impending duel with Laertes. Hamlet is perfectly resigned, in a state of "readiness," to encounter what can only be another murderous trap set by the plotting Claudius. To accept the challenge is rashness bordering on the suicidal, and understandably he feels "a kind of gaingiving as would perhaps trouble a woman." But, like Chapman's Stoic heroes Clermont and the Guise, he dismisses his well-grounded misgiving. Like Chapman, Shakespeare subtly undercuts the Stoic ideal of fortitude by having it prompt a denial of "unmanly" fear.

A Neostoic watching the final scene of the play might, nonetheless, be heartened by the spectacle of a man sustained by faith in providence carrying out the duty that his sense of moral purpose prescribes and having his faith vindicated as Claudius is destroyed by his own machinations. What a Skeptic might point out to him, however, is that Hamlet's performance in the role of the sage is dramatically undercut by the scenes that frame it. Moreover, if the ends of divine justice are being served, why is it that the process of serving it has paved the way for the emergence of a ruler probably less fit than Claudius?

In the scene immediately preceding the last one, Hamlet surrenders completely to his passions, and though his behavior toward Laertes is something he rightly repents, his exhibition of overwhelming grief over the death of Ophelia is clearly calculated to win him the sympathy of the audience that has been diminished by her suffering and the account of her miserable death. He is still clearly incapable of the apatheia he admires in the ideal of the sage. Nor are we likely to think less of him when he again surrenders completely to his passions as he kills Claudius. While he himself expresses a Stoic view of passion as evil and corrupting, his own actions imply a very different view of passion on the part of the playwright. For one thing, passion is shown to be the only means whereby Hamlet is ever able to overcome his inability to fuse thought with action. As long as he has even a moment to collect himself and reflect, he will refrain from acting on his resolutions, as he had clearly shown when he refrained from killing Claudius at prayer. Passion is potentially corrupting, but
Shakespeare, like Marston in Sophonisba, reveals that a blend of passion with Stoic virtue is possible and even desirable. Complete *apatheia* is for the passive perfectionist who retreats from the world and objective reality itself.

If we can accept Horatio's hopeful prayer and farewell to Hamlet as reliable prophecy, the prince is not destined to suffer the hellish fires that afflict his father in purgatory, even though he too has died without the last sacraments. We probably shouldn't make much of Shakespeare's summary dismissal of the eschatology that was so prominently referred to earlier in the play. But the fact that Fortinbras will be inheriting the throne of Denmark can hardly be seen as part of a tragic affirmation. The glimpses and reports we have had of this young Norwegian adventurer throw into question his fitness to rule, and we are left to wonder when his boundless ambition will prompt him to risk even more lives for some straw or eggshell. The profound skepticism and pessimism implicit in this triumph of a ruthless appetite for power combined with a mindless commitment to glory seem to anticipate the darkness of *Troilus and Cressida*.

Then everything includes itself in power,
Power into will, will into appetite;
And appetite, an universal wolf,
So doubly seconded with will and power,
Must make perforce an universal prey,
And last eat up himself.

(*Troilus and Cressida*, I. iii. 119-24)

Donne, always fascinated by the paradoxical, might point out this apparent contradiction to Cornwallis, but at the same time, as the future author of the Holy Sonnets, he might confess that he has been moved, perhaps to envy, by the spectacle of a good man raised from the anguish of skeptical despair to hope and certainty as he submits himself to a design beyond his comprehension and prepares to encounter death. He might also confess to being moved by a kind of wonder and fear as he ponders the great questions raised in the play, particularly those touching the nature of man and his relationship to God, whose mysterious designs for man according to His dreadful hidden will beget terror and mock the criteria of human judgment.

**Notes**


3 Seneca, *De Constantia Sapientis*, II. 2.

4 This contradicts somewhat his early work, the *Politiques*, which is concerned with the theory of man and society and the concept of government. See Levi, *The French Moralists*, 55. See also Bement's excellent discussion of Lipsius and Du Vair as representative of the two types of Renaissance Neostoicism, *George Chapman*, 183-86.


8 For discussion of what these concepts have in common, see above chapter 3 [in *Nobler in the Mind: The Stoic-Skeptic Dialectic in English Renaissance Tragedy*], n. 61.


10 Antoninus, Marcus Aurelius, *Communings with Himself*, XII. 5.


13 For discussion of the purgatorial context in the play and Protestant doctrine regarding purgatory, see Matheson, "*Hamlet* and "A Matter Tender and Dangerous,"" 384-85.

14 Harold Jenkins believes that the meaning is confined to this specific reference; "What the single fault corrupts is not, as so widely assumed, the man's character, but the opinion that is formed of it, his reputation, or 'image.'" Note to I. iv. 35 in his edition.

15 See Bowers, "Hamlet as Minister and Scourge." 740-49.


18 Ibid., 154.


20 See chapter 1, notes 90 and 91.


23 *Hamlet*, ed. G. L. Kittredge (New York: Ginn, 1939), note to IV. iv. 27.

24 Bradshaw, *Shakespeare's Scepticism*, 5-10.


27 Ibid., "Of the Institution and Education of Children," I. xxv, 179-80. M. A. Screech renders it, "So many names, so many victories and conquests lying buried in oblivion, make it ridiculous to hope that we shall immortalize our names by rounding up ten armed brigands or by storming some hen-house or other known

28 Matheson, "'A Matter Tender and Dangerous,'" 390.


31 See Chapter 1 [in *Nobler in the Mind: The Stoic-Skeptic Dialectic in English Renaissance Tragedy*].

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## Critical Essays: The 'Heart of My Mystery': Hamlet and Secrets

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When Elizabeth I passed through the city in 1559 to be crowned in Westminster, Londoners were treated to a magnificent spectacle. A calvacade of pageants crowded the streets; children staged dramas in which the virtues of chastity and grace were celebrated; and respected members of civic corporations showered upon the young queen gifts and presents. But the coronation entry was more than a display of citizen exuberance; it was a carefully orchestrated episode designed to dissolve factions and to bring together disparate elements at a time of political crisis, and the various stages of the procession were arranged in consultation with Elizabeth herself. A contemporary recorder recognized the implications of the event, observing 'shee [knew] … right well that in pompous ceremonies a secret of government doth much consist, for that the people are naturally both taken and held with exteriour shewes.'

The comment offers one way of assessing the mechanisms used by Elizabeth in securing and maintaining her royal power. Throughout her reign she practised what might be called a politics of secrecy, which involved cultivating a distant inscrutability even as she presented herself as open and vulnerable in matters of state. Recalling 1568 and the difficulties surrounding Mary Stuart, William Camden wrote, 'By means of these Letters, and … words, Queen Elizabeth seemed (for who can dive into the secret Meanings of Princes? and wise men do keep their Thoughts locked up within the Closet of their
Breasts, seriously to commiserate the most afflicted Princess her Kinswoman. Sly suggestion and feigned impartiality join in the description, a telling instance of Elizabeth's exercise of control masquerading as apparent weakness. On many occasions, Elizabeth would employ such tactics to her advantage, and they extended to claiming a comprehensive acquaintance with political affairs in order to contain potentially damaging influences. She rankled in 1595 at the charge that she owed James VI money, and was quick to accuse him of dishonesty: 'Suppose you that so long a raigne as mine hath so fewe frends … that … dealings made by such as ought most have helped you, could be kept secret from my knowledge?' A shrewd manipulator of counsellor and ruler alike, Elizabeth encouraged an illusion of defencelessness while remaining aloof and guardedly impenetrable.

Much has been written about the function of secrets in social organizations. Etymologically the word 'secret' has its roots in the Latin secernere, meaning to put apart or to divide, and secretus, the past participle, connotes being separated, solitary or private. These meanings suggest the ways in which secrets establish boundaries, areas of autonomy which are inaccessible to those excluded from the possession of privileged information or not privy to specialized knowledge. They recall, too, the icy reserve of Elizabeth in her speeches when she registered disapproval of the prying questions of members of parliament. Secrecy betokens the ownership of power. It should come as no surprise, therefore, that the exercise of secrecy was not the sovereign's province alone. Closed associations (or 'secret societies' as they are sometimes termed) traditionally yoke together the members of particular groupings, operating as apparatuses of control and promoting cohesion in the place of fragmentation and difference. In a Renaissance context, there were elaborate methods which evolved in order to disseminate the transmission of secrets, the techniques used by scribes or the mysteries of apprenticeship, for example. And the arcana imperii of the monarch had a counterpart in the coded systems of communication enlisted by dissidents; during the period of the English Civil War and the Interregnum, emblems, ciphers and secret discourses marked the writings of royalists wishing to escape the restrictions of censors anxious to stamp out the broadcasting of subversive political messages.

Perhaps more than Shakespeare's other plays, Hamlet has attracted readers and playgoers who have attempted to account for the fascination the central character exercises. Criticism, to adapt Hamlet's angry words to Guildenstern, has occupied itself with plucking out the 'heart' of the hero's 'mystery' (III.ii.356-7), and as Catherine Belsey notes, the 'interiority, this essence, the heart of Hamlet's mystery, has been the quarry not only of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, agents of the king's surveillance, but of liberal-humanist criticism of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.'7 Such is the volume of these exegetical endeavours, Hamlet has become a text about which no agreement seems to be possible. The more it is studied, the more obscure it appears to become. Frank Kermode writes: 'Shakespearians may find explanations of the mysteriousness … of Hamlet, by considering instead the ur-Hamlet … Once a text is credited with high authority it is studied intensely; once it is so studied it acquires … secrecy … Shakespeare is an inexhaustible source of occult readings'.8 While these are useful comments which go some way towards contextualizing the status of the play and its cultural resonances, they can be pushed further and redirected towards other modes of inquiry. One of the reasons for the interest generated by Hamlet is the play's overriding preoccupation with what is hidden and secret. Shakespeare's text primarily concerns itself with secrets, with their function, inception, management, continuation and exposure, in ways which are historically specific and politically active. The scenes of private conference, the metatextual details, the rites of initiation, and the stress upon sexuality, espionage and inheritance in Hamlet all point to a fascination with secrets and to questions of political moment in the period. Taking into account the various discourses of secrecy circulating in the English Renaissance makes possible a deeper appreciation of a play, which debates arguments concerning the usefulness of perpetuating a system dependent upon supporting the 'mysteries of state', and is informed by anxieties about an Elizabethan order spiralling towards its inevitable demise.

Illusions of Privacy
Why Hamlet's subjectivity has provoked such comment is worth pausing over for a moment. In exploring this aspect of the play, the warnings of Katharine Eisaman Maus might be heeded; she summarizes recent views on subjectivity in the period and arguments which claim that, despite a highly developed rhetoric of inwardness, the concept of privacy hardly existed. The twentieth-century vocabulary of inferiority is hardly congruent with terms popular in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries where 'secrets' most effectively conveyed a sense of the mysteries of the contents of the heart. Self-conscious metaphorical languages and representational systems took the place of concepts now assumed to be normative. Nevertheless, it is possible tentatively to suggest that part of the impact of Hamlet can be traced to its delineation of characters who struggle to hide what is within, to subordinate a sense of self by keeping secrets, and who agitate to achieve authentic subject positions. The frustrations suffered by Hamlet, incapacitated from articulating 'that within which passes show' (I.ii.85), is duplicated in a series of mirror images or doubles. In some respects Hamlet's reflection, Laertes undergoes comparable experiences. The long lesson in moral discipline given to him by Polonius has as its principle the importance of remaining separate and refusing to divulge in public secrets which may have disruptive consequences. No overt political allusions to England or Scotland rupture the texture of Hamlet, a play which only hints at the larger world of politics to which it belongs, and gestures towards the rhythms and routines of the court. Its scenes of repression, however, would seem to enact a peculiarly Renaissance phenomenon, and look forward to the circumstances of a monarch such as James I whose most intimate bodily functions were public events at which there was in attendance a substantial royal entourage. The sexual practices of his favourites, and the ailments which affected them, were all publicly discussed in a ceaseless round of gossip and social exchanges. A private realm, where such matters were not offered up for general consumption, was essentially inconceivable.

Linked to the illusion of inferiority in Hamlet is a parallel situation involving characters who appear alone on stage or who engage in 'private' conference. 'Privy' and 'private' are key terms, recurring at salient moments, as when Horatio contemplates the terrifying possibility that the ghost may be 'privy to thy country's fate' (I.i.136). In addition, few scenes contain large groups of characters; the action, although it moves outside Denmark from time to time, is dominated by Elsinore, and Hamlet must rank among the more claustrophobic of Shakespeare's plays, one which is full of incident but which figures experiences of an essentially solitary and isolated nature. Under duress Ophelia admits that Hamlet has given her 'private time' (I.iii.92); later, when counselled by her father, she remains on her own having denied Hamlet 'access' (II.i.110). Privacy is defined by Sissela Bok as 'the condition of being protected from unwanted access by others ... Claims to privacy are claims to control access to hat one takes—however grandiose—to be one's personal domain. Through such claims, and the counterclaims they often generate, people try to reinforce or expand this control. Privacy and secrecy overlap whenever the efforts at such control rely on hiding.' But in Hamlet privacy is not a matter of choice: the condition is induced, introduced through or denied by political pressure. Eavesdropping makes a mockery of bids for privacy as Ophelia overhears Hamlet's soliloquies and Polonius, killed by Hamlet in Gertrude's chamber, is replaced as eavesdropper by the ghost. Affections are annexed, and characters dictated to by the demands of a society which roots out concealment to ensure its continued survival.

Writing Secrets

A text that looks in upon itself, Hamlet occludes the meanings of which it is constituted. The play's closest relative is the legend of Pandora's box, the mythic jar containing the gifts of misery and hope in classical accounts of the creation. Vigorously suggestive in this respect, the language of Hamlet clusters about ideas of locking, covering and shutting away material which, if released, could have disastrous ramifications. Ophelia locks up Laertes's advice in her 'memory' (I.iii.85) and acts upon Polonius's order to 'lock herself from' Hamlet's 'resort' (II.ii.143). As characters in the play withhold or resist expressing what they know, so do they shield themselves by adopting roles and false identities. When he puts 'on' his 'antic disposition' (I.v.180), it is as if Hamlet wears his madness like a garment; Gertrude dons a disguise more substantial than this, and her heart is described as being encased in armour (III.iv.35-8). At times it appears, indeed, that nothing is in the open in Elsinore, the castle and its environs taking on the properties of a baffling, metaphysical, labyrinthine
What is secret in *Hamlet* cannot easily be comprehended or embraced: either it is rarely articulated or it is the privileged possession of a single character. These secrets are unspoken, silent; they are also difficult to see or to perceive. Nor can they be read; in this respect, *Hamlet*, like other Shakespearean plays, displays a preoccupation with metatextual questions. At the level of writing, secrets are implied in the number of references to sealed documents. 'Upon his will I seal'd my hard consent' (I.ii.60) says Polonius of Laertes's petition; Rosencrantz and Guildenstern bear 'letters seal'd' (III.iv.204) to England; 'everything is seal'd and done' (IV.iii.59) thinks Claudius of his scheme to have Hamlet assassinated; and Hamlet's decision to 'unseal' (V.ii.17) this 'grand commission' (V.ii.18) saves him from becoming the intended victim of the same plot. Whether the letters reach their ostensible destination or are substituted in an effort to forestall political conspiracy, they can still have a deadly effect: Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are murdered when they become ensnared in a web of textual communications.

One of the motivating energies of *Hamlet* is Claudius's anxious desire to have established the foundations of his rule; it is a concern of such weight that he is eventually precipitated into attempting to wipe out those who block the path towards dominion. In this connection *Hamlet* seems to implicate itself in the kinds of political activities which characterized the period, and which shaped struggles for supremacy in the later sixteenth century. Only in the 1580s James had conducted a clandestine correspondence with various elder statesmen in England in order to cement a Scottish-English alliance and possibly to seal his own claims to one or other of the crowns. A letter of 1584 to Mary Stuart shows James rejecting his mother's design for an association under which she and her son would share the Scottish kingdom; James wrote reprovingly about the 'secret instructions that Your Majesty forbids me to ever reveal to any one'. Later in the year, courted by Cecil this time, he was prepared to contemplate abandoning his mother and siding with English forces, and James ensured that the bearer of the letters expressing his enthusiasm for the project was 'directed … with more special and secret commission than any I ever directed before'. The scrupulous attention to the transmission of these documents was entirely necessary, for when the intrigue came before Elizabeth, she was furious, writing in 1585, 'we old foxes can find shiftes to saue ourselves by others malice, and come by knowledge of greatest secreat, spetiallye if it touche our freholde.' This chastening experience appears to have instilled in James a fastidious regard for secret texts; lest his private thoughts be known, everything he wrote thereafter he subjected to strict protective regulations. Even *Basilikon Doron*, published in 1599, had to answer to these requirements, James at first permitting only seven copies 'to be printed, the Printer being first sworne for secrecie' The lesson of misdirected political aspirations had been learned.

The timely exposure of James's clumsy manoeuvrings checked his predilection for intrigue, at least while his mother was still alive. With the reading of the letters in *Hamlet* (their contents being, as it were, textualized) comes the series of revelations that brings about the unravelling and partial resolution of its complications. For if the play obsessively folds up information into itself, simultaneously it illuminates and brings secrets to light. The reflections of Foucault on sexuality may be relevant here: he argues that secrets are forced into hiding so as to make possible their eventual discovery. Entering into a critical relationship with *Hamlet* entails interpreting acts of repression and equally powerful representations of unburdening, showing and disclosing. The first we hear is for Barnardo to 'unfold' (I.i.2) himself as he cannot be seen in the darkness. The Queen asks for Hamlet to 'cast' his 'nighted colour off (I.ii.68), to put aside his funereal garb and to present himself in brighter hues. Although constriction is associated with Ophelia, tied to her is an antithetical idea of unchecked movement: Polonius will 'loose' (II.i.162) her to Hamlet and exploit her innocence in a plan to have demonstrated the causes of his mad, melancholic malady. If *Hamlet* is a drama of cloistered communications, failed missives and tortured intellects, it is also one in which frustrations strive towards a climactic release.

**Demonic Awakenings**
Nowhere is this dialectic between hiding and unearthing or manifesting made more apparent than in the appearance of the ghost. This figurative unearthing provides the play with one of its most potent moments of unlocking as the tomb is broken to release the restless spirit. Typically the ghost is surrounded in mystery: 'This to me / In dreadful secrecy impart they did' (I.ii.206-7) Horatio states, informing Hamlet of the supernatural visitation. In his reply, Hamlet urges his friends to consign the ghost to an area of unseen, unspoken phenomena—'if you have hithero conceal'd this sight, / Let it be tenable in your silence still … Give it an understanding but no tongue' (I.ii.247-50)—although when the apparition is confronted, metaphors of unclasping and expulsion dominate, replacing the veiled occurrences of the previous scenes:

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but tell
Why thy canoniz'd bones, hearsed in death,
Have burst their cerements, why the sepulchre
Wherein we saw thee quietly inurn'd
Hath op'd his ponderous and marble jaws
To cast thee up again.
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(I.iv.46-51)

At last the ghost's voice rings out, but one of the revelations which has been anticipated is tantalizingly postponed. Promising to deliver unknown truths, the ghost only hints at secrets which will not be broken:

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But that I am forbid
To tell the secrets of my prison-house,
I could a tale unfold …
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For Hamlet, though, the story he hears is enough to impel him to make certain again of his friends' confidence: 'Never make known what you have seen tonight' (I.v.149).

Considering the ghost's appearance permits several broad patterns to emerge. As he listens to the disclosure and learns the fantastic secret, Hamlet's antipathy towards Claudius hardens and he elects himself co-conspirator in the execution of revenge. His conduct is a dramatic realization of the ways in which secrecy, according to Sissela Bok, can 'fuel gross intolerance and hatred towards outsiders. At the heart of secrecy lies discrimination of some form, since its essence is sifting, setting apart, drawing lines.' Bok's observations are similarly helpful in contextualizing Hamlet's swearing his friends to secrecy with frantic, elaborate insistence immediately after the ghost's departure. Confidentiality helps to explain 'the ritualistic tone in which the duty of preserving secrets is repeatedly set forth in professional oaths and codes of ethics', she writes. 'Still more is needed, however, to explain the sacrosanct nature often ascribed to this duty.' Professional dimensions of secrecy are not too far removed from Hamlet. An ecstatic fervour marks Hamlet once the ghost has made its pronouncements, and the urgency with which he guarantees the silence of Horatio and Marcellus smacks of the ceremonial of an arcane religious ritual. Now that he owns the ghost's knowledge, it is as if the transformed Hamlet has successfully passed through an initiation rite.

In The History of Carolina (1714), John Lawson describes the practice of 'Husquenawing' common to some native American tribes. During the ceremony, which is intended to instil reverence towards superiors, young men are imprisoned in a house of correction where they are starved in darkness:

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Besides, they give them Pellitory-Bark, and several intoxicating Plants, that make them go raving made as ever were any People in the World; and you may hear them make the most dismal and hellish Cries, and Howlings, that ever humane Creatures express'd; all which continues about five or six Weeks, and the little Meat they eat, is the nastiest, loathsome stuff, and mixt with all manner of Filth it's possible to get. After the Time is expired, they are
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brought out of the Cabin, which never is in the Town, but always a distance off, and guarded
by a Jaylor or two, who watch by Turns. Now, when they first come out, they are as poor as
ever any Creatures were; for you must know several die under this diabolical Purgation.
Moreover, they either really are, or pretend to be dumb, and do not speak for several Days; I
think, twenty or thirty; and look gastly, and are so chang'd, that it's next to an Impossibility to
know them again, although you was never so well acquainted with them before.\textsuperscript{22}

Many cultures have elaborated rites of passage during which the adolescents of the community are separated,
tested and finally granted a more mature status, often being offered secret gifts of wisdom and experience that
accompany the shedding of old dependencies and the assumption of new responsibilities. Through ceremonies
of induction, the novice enters the adult world in a ritualized enactment of the movement from one stage of
development to the next.\textsuperscript{23}

Celebrations of the young person's incorporation into a new community are charged with local meanings and
associations. It would be unwise to argue for generalized patterns which overcome historical contingencies.
However, prudence cannot totally foreclose a discursive correspondence between the broad outlines of
Lawson's description, whose general features reappear in countless other accounts, and Hamlet's behaviour.
Quickly following upon the ghost's revelation is Ophelia's report of Hamlet's appearance in her chamber:

\begin{verbatim}

Lord Hamlet, with his doublet all unbrac'd,
No hat upon his head, his stockings foul'd,
Ungarter'd and down-gyved to his ankle,
Pale as his shirt, his knees knocking each other,
And with a look so piteous in purport
As if he had been loosed out of hell
To speak of horrors, he comes before me.
\end{verbatim}

\textit{(II. i. 78-84)}

Apart from the suggestions of sexual assault and the familiar metaphors of exposure, the passage is striking as
it enlists initiation rite motifs—the dirt, pallor, dumb language, seeming madness and infernal connotations. It
is as if Hamlet, no longer in the first flush of youth, has belatedly undergone a rude, cathartic awakening, and
has been admitted to terrifying realities. In Joel Fineman's elegant but enigmatic phrase, 'Placed between
maternal presence and paternal absence, Hamlet learns, and becomes, the "secret" of the primal scene.'\textsuperscript{24} The
immediate mystery of the ghost resolved, Hamlet's fate is sealed.

\section*{Sexual Places}

\textit{Hamlet} abounds in secret places, whether they be Ophelia's chamber, Gertrude's closet or the 'removed
ground' (I. iv. 61) from which the ghost announces to Hamlet its chilling injunctions. All of these spaces are
connected, and Hamlet's experience of them leads him to a confrontation with sexual forces that lurk in
hiding, pushed into concealment by Elsinore's political wrangles. As Foucault points out, from the
Renaissance onwards, sex was presented as 'something akin to a secret … [a] disquieting enigma: not a thing
which stubbornly shows itself, but one which always hides, the insidious presence that speaks in a voice so
muted and often disguised that one risks remaining deaf to it.'\textsuperscript{25} In fairy tales, too, such as 'Bluebeard' or 'The
Enchanted Pig', a child discovers forbidden information by unlocking the door of a secret place or room where
are kept books or evidence of carnal knowledge.\textsuperscript{26} About sex in \textit{Hamlet} there gathers conflict, restriction and
covert argument. Whatever secretively took place between Claudius and Gertrude prior to the murder of
Hamlet senior is hedged about with silences, ambiguities and nervous speculations. In particular Ophelia
suffers at the hands of a system which outlaws and straightjackets the expression of unhindered sexuality. She
is advised by Laertes not to 'open' her 'chaste treasure' to Hamlet's 'unmaster'd importunity' (I.iii.31-2);
virginity is a precious item in a coffer's inventory, to be prized and removed from contact. Her beauty,
similarly, should not be allowed to 'unmask' (I.iii.37) itself, an ironic choice of word as this applies more to
Hamlet who wishes to strip off the smooth urbanity that cloaks Claudius's villainy. The logical extension of
these practices of sexual containment is Ophelia's madness and her song about Saint Valentine's day duplicity:

_Tomorrow is Saint Valentine's day,
All in the morning betime,
And I a maid at your window,
To be your Valentine.
Then up he rose, and donn'd his clo'es,
And dupp'd the chamber door,
Let in the maid that out a maid
Never departed more._

(IV. v. 48-55)

Metaphorically, in the fateful chamber, Ophelia has yielded her treasure, and the knowledge gained
contributes catastrophically to the sequence of events culminating in her death. A tone of sombre, chastened
reflection informs these scenes which forcefully communicate the extremity of Ophelia's chaotic condition.
The issues represented here also spill over into other parts of the play. The king's spies, Rosencrantz and
Guildenstern, joke together saying that they live in the 'privates' (II.ii.234) of Fortune, to which Hamlet
replies: 'In the secret parts of Fortune? O most true, she is a strumpet' (II.ii.235-6). Now a fickle woman
replaces Ophelia's dissembling gentleman, but the idea of a sexuality that is or should be invisible or
unintelligible is common to both types. Ballad and bawdy interchange unite in stimulating a suspicious
interrogation of sexuality's enticing unknowability.27

The troubled soliloquies, whispered conversations and hushed, ghostly introductions that lend _Hamlet_
its air of secrecy combine with constructions of woman in a dislocating anatomization of practices that are never
clearly defined, but only hinted at through the use of euphemisms and rhetorical figures. Metaphor and
metonymy rule the sexual discussion of _Hamlet_, miming the features of Renaissance legal treatments of the
subject. The etymological roots of 'secret' and 'sex' are the same, and in contemporary judicial discourses
'secrets' indicated the sexual parts.28 In addition, women were traditionally perceived either as themselves
'secrets', embodying the secrets of life, or as 'leaky vessels' incapable of respecting the confidences with which
they were entrusted.29 It is less the language of the courthouse which colours _Hamlet_, however, than the
insecurities fostered in a society ruled over by a sovereign in whom the boundaries between male and female
were indistinct. A woman occupying a traditionally male position, Elizabeth was princess and prince to her
people at one and the same time. Although she played multiple sexual roles with delighted ease—idealized
shepherdess, besieged mistress and chaste goddess—she was still mysterious, virginal, protective of her secret
self.30 The single status she maintained was her greatest political asset; consequently, negotiations for possible
marriages were enveloped in secrecy and subterfuge. Anticipating a visit by Francis of Valois, the Duke of
Alençon, one of her suitors, Elizabeth wrote to her ambassador in France in 1574: 'For that if there follow no
liking between us after a view taken the one of the other, the more secretly it be handled, the less touch will it
be to both our honours.'31 But the idea Elizabeth popularized, that she was wife and mother to the nation,
could not remain unchallenged. An unmarried woman was an ideological anomaly in the English Renaissance,
a monstrous curiosity who would provoke salacious conjecture. Quarter sessions of the period overflow with
seditious remarks, many of them directed against Elizabeth; in 1590, two Essex peasants came before the
authorities for having claimed that the queen had secretly delivered two children, and that the Earl of
Leicester, the father, had left them in a chimney to be burnt alive. A Colchester yeoman, Thomas Wenden,
was punished in about the same year for alleging that Elizabeth was 'an arrant whore'.32 These cases throw
light on the predicament of a female ruler steering a course between wielding male prerogatives and
performing the part of a delighted recipient of her courtiers' attentions. They convey a powerful sense of
limited possibilities, of the constrictions of _Hamlet_ and the embittered sexual comment which is its hallmark,
and the contradictions with which Elizabeth wrestled as she sought to establish her political place in the face
of forces both oppositional and intransigent.

Political Secrets

The sequestration of Ophelia and her accompanying collapse direct attention to the means by which Elsinore constructs itself as a political system. Most obviously, Claudius relies upon techniques of surveillance, arguing that they are legitimate ways of exerting authority as leader of a state. Contemporary thinkers approved in principle of espionage as a justifiable weapon to be employed by sixteenth-and seventeenth-century rulers, and also held that spies needed to be chosen with the utmost rigour and care. Giovanni Botero observed in *The Reason of State*, published in Italian in 1589, that since 'counsellors and ambassadors, secretaries and spies are those who deal most often with secret matters, they should be selected for their acute minds and for their taciturnity'. Claudius takes this advice to heart and makes full use of the willingness of his servants to eavesdrop upon his subjects, but the transparent Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and the garrulous Polonius, would seem to be unfit candidates for the model agents Botero recommends.

Foucault remarks that secrecy is 'indispensable to … [the] operation [of power] … power imposes secrecy on those whom it dominates'. It is a formulation pertinent to *Hamlet*, to the desperate methods hatched by Claudius to tighten his tenuous hold on a kingdom threatened from within, by Hamlet, and from without, by Norwegian insurgencies. With little compunction he dispatches Voltimand and Cornelius to Old Norway to work in secret to young Fortinbras's disadvantage. A similar partnership is shared by Rosencrantz and Guildenstern: they are appointed to find out about Hamlet's bizarre distemper, later assuming the mantle of hired murderers. Throughout, their behind-the-scenes conduct disrupts the flow of social intercourse; Hamlet attacks their 'secrecy to the King' (II.ii.294) and maintains, since they have purposes which they do not reveal, that he enjoys an equivalent privilege: 'That I can keep your counsel and not mine own' (IV.i.10). Everything recovered in Elsinore falls prey to public scrutiny, and even Hamlet's private letters to Ophelia are not exempt from being read aloud in court. The need to police, inform and control what are seen to be deviancies infects Denmark at every level, dislocating political and familial relationships: Polonius schools the aptly named Reynaldo in the arts of surveillance, and Laertes is obliged to return from France 'in secret' (IV.v.88).

The mechanisms of surveillance in Elsinore express themselves in a number of ways. They are immediately apprehended in acts of secreting, and Polonius is the most diligent and enthusiastic of practitioners. With Claudius he decides to 'bestow' (III.i.44) himself to overhear private conversations. Once discovered by Hamlet behind the arras in Gertrude's chamber, he is dispatched, taking his information with him in death. As Hamlet says: 'This counsellor / Is now most still, most secret, and most grave, / Who was in life a foolish prating knave' (III.iv.215-17). When it comes to Polonius's burial, he is put to rest 'hugger-mugger' (IV.v.84) or secretively. The bumbling politician who prided himself on his skills in concealment is rewarded with an apposite tribute, an anonymous funeral at which no guest is present.

Articles which are secreted can turn rank and poisonous. The body decays, corrupts and becomes the feeding-ground for bacteria; politic worms make a meal of Polonius's corpse. Terms referring to opening and closing distinguish *Hamlet's* exploration of secrecy; a similarly emphatic set of metaphors locates itself in disease and illness. 'Here is your husband, like a mildew'd ear / Blasting his wholesome brother' (III.iv.64-5) says Hamlet, threatening Gertrude with images of his father and uncle. In a shrewd impersonation of ignorance born out of sympathy, Claudius pretends to have misled himself in his assessment of Hamlet:

But so much was our love,
We would not understand what was most fit,
But like the owner of a foul disease,
To keep it from divulging, let it feed
Even on the pith of life.

(IV.i.19-23)
'Divulging' is being used richly, I think. The term carries the sense of 'becoming public', and there is the suggestion of a spreading infection, the existence of which has been carefully hidden from knowledge. The condition afflicting Claudius brings to mind Sissela Bok's remarks on the effects of nurturing secrets over a period of time:

The fear of conspiracies, of revenge, and of the irreversible consequences of opening Pandora's box nourishes this view, as does awareness of the corruption that secrecy can breed. Thus Jung wrote that the keeping of secrets acts like a psychic poison, alienating their possessor from the community. Like other poisons, he wrote, it may be beneficial in small doses, but its destructive power is otherwise great.37

The strategies adopted by Claudius have as their objective the validation of what is already an uncertain claim to royal authority. But Hamlet flushes out or finds out his inefficient intelligencers; the rottenness in Denmark grows unabated, while a racked Claudius festers from within, consumed by an experience that he does not dare to put into words.

Stories and Confessions

Traditionally poison, infection and secrecy have formed an uneasy alliance. Keeping secrets is often regarded as a species of transgression which can only result in the owner being rewarded with eventual illness. It is a relationship which can be taken back to early hypnotists and doctors who, by bringing into the open painful secrets, aimed to cure the afflictions of their patients. Only by confession, the Christian fathers held, could such poisons be purged and the sufferer be restored to wholeness and grace.38 Admitting to secrets entailed absolution, reintegration into the community and the banishment of intolerable, extreme experiences.

Not one but several confessions interlace the structure of Hamlet. The ghost's use of the word 'disappointed' (I.v.77) suggests that the last rite of absolution was not ministered, and Hamlet is the first to hear its confessional revelations. Hamlet, intending to bring Claudius to justice at the performance of The Murder of Gonzago, later imagines an explosive disclosure prompted by an unbearable conflation of fiction and fact:

I have heard
That guilty creatures sitting at a play
Have, by the very cunning of the scene,
Been struck so to the soul that presently
They have proclaim'd their malefactions.
For murder, though it have no tongue, will speak
With most miraculous organ.

(II.ii.584-90)

Tension mounts during the performance as Hamlet fears that the players will reveal the design: 'The players cannot keep counsel: they'll tell all' (III.ii.137-8). But Claudius's longed-for confession is not forthcoming on this occasion; Hamlet must wait until he comes across the king at prayer, and even then he arrives too late. Claudius complains:

Pray can I not,
Though inclination be as sharp as will,
My stronger guilt defeats my strong intent,
And, like a man to double business bound,
I stand in pause where I first begin,
And both neglect.

(III.iii.38-43)
For Hamlet and Claudius, the confession backfires and is anti-climactic. The secret is confessed in secret; Hamlet enters only after the declaration has been completed, and there will be no public outcry to support him in his endeavour. Potentially a murderer, Hamlet here becomes an unpunctual father confessor, frozen into immobility by the possibility of the repentant Claudius gaining salvation.

Treacherous currents run through *Hamlet*, a play that comes perilously close to destabilizing monarchical power and the shibboleths that propped up its institutions. The possibility that there could be royal self-exposure instilled horror in most contemporary commentators on the traditions the ruler was expected to observe. In his essays, composed between 1597 and 1625, Bacon argued that 'an Habit of Secrecy, is both Politick, and Morall'; and went on to state: 'As to Secrecy; Princes are not bound to communicate all Matters, with all Counsellors; but may extract and select. Neither is it necessary, that he that consulteth what he should doe, should declare what he will doe. But let Princes beware, that the unsecreting of their Affairs, comes not from Themselves.' Put briefly, the ruler was obliged to shun the counsellor attempting to delve too far into royal mysteries, and to concentrate instead upon preserving an imperviousness to external influences and a veneer of studied self-sufficiency. Both Elizabeth and James subscribed to these necessities with zealous commitment. More keenly than his predecessor, James developed his sublime inaccessibility into a fine art. Only occasionally was a member of his circle admitted to his personal ruminations, as when he recommended to Elizabeth in 1585 the bearer of a letter, Sir William Keith, 'Whom I have directed, not as in any public message but priuatlye, to informe yow of my secret intention in all thinges.' The theme dominated James's political transactions, reaching its completesti statement in *Basilikon Doron*, published in 1599, in which he informed his son that 'a King will haue need to vse secrecie in may thinges: but yet behaue your selfe so in your greatest secrets, as yee neede not bee ashamed, suppose they were all proclaimed at the mercate crosse'. Embodied in the injunction is the elaboration of a strict code of ethics which can nevertheless admit of the potential for fallibility and leakage. It is possible to pinpoint in *Hamlet*, therefore, moments of subversive discontent, and the scene in which Claudius almost uncovers himself throws off echoes of contemporary worries about the insubstantiality of the royal identity and the fragility of the barriers which separated monarch from subject. Hamlet's accidental intrusion is dangerous. As Louis Adrian Montrose states: 'To "discover" the nakedness of the prince is both to locate and reveal—to demystify—the secrets of state.'

Balancing itself between attempts to obscure realities and equally urgent impulses to have them illuminated, *Hamlet* cuts across the fears that animated a Renaissance ruler's darkest fantasies.

In quick, narrative strokes, Shakespeare sketches patterns of concealment and exposure in *Hamlet*. One scene delineates Polonius rushing to hide behind the arras; the next shows Claudius describing his crime for the first time. An alternating between hiding and revealing is the play's structural principle, the basis of its rhythm, the chief characteristic of its movement and procedure. At many points a secret is contracted in such a way as to suggest that its contents will immediately be broadcasted, or the play implies that vital intimacies hover on the brink of discovery. No sooner has Hamlet committed himself to the trust of Horatio and Marcellus—'But you'll be secret?' (I.v.127)—than he refuses to publish his secret: 'There's never a villain dwelling in all Denmark / But he's an arrant knave' (I.v.129-30). When he visits Gertrude in her closet, Hamlet warns her not to reveal his pretence of madness, and threatens drastic consequences: 'No, in despite of sense and secrecy, / Unpeg the basket on the house's top' (III.iv.194-5). That Gertrude confirms to Claudius that Hamlet is, indeed, insane signals either her incomprehension or her confidence. In a curious grammatical construction that echoes the ghost, Hamlet promises finally to show up the seedy operations that contaminate Elsinore but retracts at the last moment:

Had I but time—as this fell sergeant, Death, Is strict in his arrest—O, I could tell you— But let it be.

(V.ii.341-3)
The confession is never made and indefinitely held in abeyance. Hamlet withdraws the promise to Horatio he has only just contracted. Like the ghost, he undertakes to tell a story which fails to materialize.

**Secrets and Succession**

A narrative of deeper consequence was coming to an end in the later sixteenth century, and another was about to commence. The last decades of Elizabeth's reign were tense and unstable, plagued by conspiracy, rebellion, economic distress and harvest failure. Contemporaneous with *Hamlet*, usually dated 1599-1601, was widespread speculation about how long the queen's health could last, and how soon a successor might be chosen. Although the question of the succession had monopolized the early parliaments, and continued to surface at moments of crisis in the ensuing years, by 1600 it seems to have fallen dormant. There was no 'golden speech' in which Elizabeth categorically identified a replacement, but few could doubt the most likely candidate. That James VI of Scotland would ascend to the throne appears to have been an open secret. Or perhaps not. After the ill-fated affair of the 1580s, James had quelled his Machiavellian dissimulations. But the 1590s show him renewing scheming contrivances, commending himself indiscriminately to various catholics, and corresponding with Florence and with Tyrone, in anticipation of being elected to the English monarchy. Most intriguing were the letters that passed between James and Cecil in which preparations were made for the Scottish king's assumption of duties and London arrival. Complex numero-logical codes prevented the identities of the writers from being known; they constituted a private language designed to foil Elizabeth's intercepting agents. In 1601 James wrote to Cecil, concluding 'And in the meantime ye may rest assured of the constant love and secrecy of Your most loving and assured friend, 30.' When in 1602 he brought into the plan a new recruit, possibly Charles Howard, Earl of Nottingham, James wrote: 'so have I for the present no other recompense to send you for your goodwill but my faithful promise that all my dealing with you shall ever be accompanied with these three qualities: honesty, secrecy, and constancy.' The final days of Elizabeth were fast approaching. At first, her illness was kept secret but, when it became obvious that she would not live, her condition was made public. Without voice as death neared, she nominated with signs her successor, James, who may now have been able to convince himself that his furtive ventures had resulted in a tangible achievement.

Pages of critical exegesis have dwelt upon the eerie conjunction of Elizabeth's nomination of James, and Hamlet's election of Fortinbras with his dying voice. The house of Hamlet, like the house of Tudor, labours under a sentence of death. It is not the uniqueness of the parallel to which I am drawn, however; rather, the process whereby Hamlet comes to elect the Norwegian prince is what prompts interest. As the play proceeds, an audience is bombarded with conflicting messages concerning the Danish monarchy, not one of which appears to be privileged. On the issue of the succession, *Hamlet* prevaricates; in the same way, Elizabeth's reign was characterized by a singular insecurity about the continuation of her royal line. For much of the play, who precisely is the rightful heir is not made clear, although it seems that Hamlet will be king eventually. But cryptic remarks continually disallow such a straightforward reading, as in the second scene when Claudius refers to Gertrude as a 'jointress' (I.ii.9), implying that she, too, has a legitimate claim. The hint, voiced later, that Claudius usurped the throne (III.iv.96-101) adds to the confusion, as do passing comments in act four which suggest that Hamlet may accede with the help of popular protest. In a startling volte-face, act five abruptly establishes that Denmark is an elective rather than a hereditary system. What galls Hamlet is that Claudius 'Popp'd in between th'election and my hopes' (V.ii.65), and Fortinbras offers corroboration of the elective process on taking control (V.ii.402). Until this point, the subject of the future of the state has been shrouded in obscurity. As E. A. J. Honigmann states: 'the mystery of the Danish succession only yields its secret' in the final scene. His observation invites a reconsideration of the plight of England as the Elizabethan period drew to a close. Years of uncertainty culminated in the investment of James at Elizabeth's death; the knowledge that Hamlet, having been deprived of the opportunity to assume power, can elect Fortinbras, finally resolves the play of its contradictions. It is as if the doubts riddling *Hamlet* follow the contours of the questions never answered by Elizabeth, a sovereign destined to die, like Hamlet, without issue, unable to pass on her inheritance to a direct descendant.
Often Shakespearean plays cast glances ahead to the restitution of order when they close, but critical argument can only confine itself to the evidence presented within the parameters of the text. However, Horatio's pat summary to Fortinbras of the action does not bode well for the unravelling of difficulties. As Terence Hawkes suggests, Horatio's rehearsal 'mocks at the subtleties, the innuendoes, the contradictions, the imperfectly realized motives and sources for action that have been exhibited to us.' 48 Another Claudius, it seems as if Horatio will only obscure secrets rather than allowing them to see revealment. Fortinbras, the arch-exponent of what Sissela Bok terms 'military secrecy', as he relies upon 'surprise and stratagems', is bent more upon removing the carnage and proclaiming his victory. 49 While Horatio is determined that events in Elsinore be generally known—'let me speak to th'veyet unknowing world' (V.ii.384)—Fortinbras cleverly manages to make sure that the story will first be heard by a select, private gathering, thereby suppressing what might constitute threatening political secrets: 'Let us haste to hear it, / And call the noblest to the audience' (V.ii.391-2). 50 What that audience hears is not for the ears of the spectators in the theatre; the play ends with the shadowy Fortinbras stifling elucidation, not encouraging it, and with another act of deferral.

Conclusions

The text of Hamlet covers and exposes its meanings (it dilates and contracts with the diastole-stystole beat of a heart), but it also teases phenomenologically, constantly promising to show itself but usually yielding only a glimpse of its secret interior. With reference to Hamlet, Patricia Parker has touched upon this aspect, writing: 'Derrida's punning "différance"is silent on this third term from that single Latin root, that of dilatio or dilation, which in Renaissance usage in its verbal form meant not only to expand, disperse, or spread abroad but also to put off, postpone, prolong, or protract—meanings that still linger in the modern English "dilatory". 51 To identify the postponements of Hamlet is a prolegomenon to a longer critique. What I have attempted to illustrate is the relationship between Hamlet's deferrals and politics, the ways in which the play thematizes the various secret processes whereby power was perpetuated in the English Renaissance. My reading is that Shakespeare's drama has a charged place in a culture in which notions of privacy were being hotly debated, in which dangerous letters concerning the state of the kingdom circulated, and in which the strains and stresses of a monarchy in eclipse fuelled deep-seated political tensions. Hamlet coincides with floods of espionage in the later sixteenth century, with gloomy forebodings about the condition of the nation, with scurrilous innuinations about the queen's sexual status, and with anxieties about her vulnerability—activities and preoccupations which impinge upon the course of the play's trajectory. Embedded in Hamlet are radical energies, a dissatisfaction with the politics of secrecy, and a demythologizing, dismantling treatment of arcane royal ceremonies. Two questions would seem to arise from this critical stance. What was the 'fate' of England, and who was 'privy' to it? Yet Shakespeare does not pose dilemmas so baldly, nor does he often deal in the currency of direct political allusions. More diffuse and subtler effects are achieved by the dramatist. The rhythms of the play, however, continually lead back to matters of contemporary import, to Elizabeth's hesitancy to name a successor, to the rituals that would surround her death, to the awakening of a new Stuart dynasty, and to the rites that James, in his inauguration as king, would experience. This is the sense in which it might be possible to begin to talk about the prophetic soul of the play, not the prince.

Both Elizabeth and James had frequent recourse to an identical formula. When they needed to put off answering delicate questions, they argued that God alone knew all secrets and could bring them from the gloom where they lurked into brightness. Angrily responding to parliament in 1586 on the subject of Mary Stuart, Elizabeth stated: 'If there be any that think I have prolonged the time of purpose to make a counterfeit show of clemency, they do me the most undeserved wrong, as He knoweth, which is the Searcher of the most secret thoughts of the heart.' 52 Likewise, in Basilikon Doron (1599) James observed that 'the deepest of our secrets, cannot be hidde from that all-seeing eye, and penetrant light, piercing through the bowels of very darkenesse it selfe.' 53 Most sixteenth- and seventeenth-century reformers would have endorsed these sentiments, although they might have added that every secret would be revealed with the second coming of Christ. 54 There is not the merest suggestion of such justice informing Hamlet. The last scene offers little divine comfort to dispel the grim truths it reinforces. Towards an intensification of confusion and a thickening
of mystification is the direction in which the play tends. Hamlet's spiritual fate is in doubt, as Horatio's worried invocation of the flights of angels indicates. Horatio muddles his unfolding of the secrets of Elsinore, and Fortinbras's political programme remains chillingly sketchy and enigmatic. No final word of judgement cuts through the clouds of uncertainty. No revelation is at hand, no key available to unlock the contents of the heart. The only assurance is engulfment by an ineluctable darkness.

Notes


3 John Bruce, ed., *Letters of Queen Elizabeth and James VI of Scotland*, Camden Society, 46 (1849), p. 169. See also


12 The metaphor of Denmark as a prison is made explicit in the version of *Hamlet* printed in the first folio; see *Mr. William Shakespeares comedies, histories, & tragedies* (London, 1623; S.T.C. 22373), p. 262.


16 Bruce, ed., *Letters*, p. 17. It has not been categorically established that Elizabeth is responding in this letter to the correspondence of the previous year, and any argument attached to her indignation must be necessarily conjectural. Some historians hold that James deliberately encouraged policies that would have led to his mother's death; the correspondence relating to this theory is rife with references to secrets. See Robert S. Rait and Annie I. Cameron, *King James's Secret* (London: Nisbet, 1927), pp. 11, 51, 120, 131, 157, 173, 191, 197.


20 Bok, *Secrets*, p. 28.


Garber, but she does not consider the implications of the scene in which Hamlet appears in Ophelia's chamber. See her *Coming of Age in Shakespeare* (London and New York: Methuen, 1981), pp. 198-205.

25 Foucault, *History*, p. 35. See also


27 Jacques Lacan makes a similar point about the play: 'The object of desire is essentially different from the object of any need [besoin]. Something becomes an object in desire when it takes the place of what by its very nature remains concealed from the subject: that self-sacrifice, that pound of flesh which is mortgaged [engage] in his relationship to the signifier. This is profoundly enigmatic, for it is ultimately a relationship to something secret and hidden.' See his 'Desire and the Interpretation of Desire in *Hamlet*’ in Shoshana Felman, ed., *Literature and Psychoanalysis* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982), p. 28.


34 Foucault, *History*, p. 86.

35 As Sissela Bok points out, secrecy and property are connected: 'At its root, it is closely linked to identity, in that people take some secrets, such as hidden love letters, to belong to them more than to others, to be proper to them. We link such secrets with our identity, and resist intrusions into them’ (Bok, *Secrets*, p. 24). The public world of Elsinore fuels Hamlet's ruminations on his own identity.

36 Pierre Bourdieu has noted that ""Behind" is naturally associated with "inside", with … all that is private, secret and hidden'. See his *The Logic of Practice*, tr. Richard Nice (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), p. 90.
37 Bok, Secrets, p. 8.


40 For comparisons between Elizabeth and James on this issue, see Secret History of the Court of James I, 2 vols (Edinburgh: James Ballantyne, 1811), I, 69, 77, 320. Most illuminating on James's cult of secrecy is Goldberg, James I, pp. xii, 56, 65, 83.

41 Bruce, ed., Letters, p. 25.

42 Basilikon Doron in McIlwain, ed., Works, p. 44. For the fate visited upon those who were too inquisitive, see John Chamberlain, The Letters, ed. Norman Egbert McClure, 2 vols (Philadelphia: The American Philosophical Society, 1939), II, 14.


44 David Harris Willson, King James VI and I (London: Cape, 1966), pp. 142, 147, 148.

45 Akrigg, ed., Letters, p. 180. See also


49 Bok, Secrets, p. 191.

50 Horatio here invokes the theory that the 'public has a right to know', itself a fallacy. 'How can one lay claims to a right to Know the truth when even partial knowledge is out of reach concerning most human affairs, and when bias and rationalization and denial skew and limit knowledge still further?' (Bok, Secrets, p. 254).

51 Patricia Parker, 'Deferral, Dilation, Différance: Shakespeare, Cervantes, Jonson' in Parker and Quint, eds, Literary Theory / Renaissance Texts, p. 182. Parker has in mind, I think, Derrida's essay 'Différance' which is reprinted in Peggy Kamuf, ed., A Derrida Reader: Between the Blinds (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester

52 Rice, ed., *Public Speaking*, p. 93.


The First Quarto of *Hamlet*: Reforming Widow Gertred:
Introduction

The First Quarto of *Hamlet*: Reforming Widow Gertred

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Critics who compare the First Quarto's Gertred with Gertrard of the Second Quarto and Gertrude of the Folio have for the most part found Gertred more "sympathetic."1 Once informed that her new husband is a murderer, she commits herself unequivocally to Hamlet's cause, promising to keep up connubial appearances only to deceive Claudius. Rather than another variation on the Shakespearean category "woman with divided loyalties," like *King John's* Blanche, *Antony and Cleopatra's* Octavia, or *Hamlet's* Gertrard/Gertrude, Gertred is now all mother. Moreover, throughout the play she has been pious, reserved, passive, unexceptional; who would not have his widow so? Although the First Quarto does not resolve questions about Gertred's sexual behavior or erase the story's inherent misogyny, it does present a queen who differs so significantly from her counterparts that she impresses critics as the site of greatest difference between the variant texts.2

Of the three texts, Q1, first discovered in the 1820s, is the most enigmatic, retaining its notorious distinction as the best known of the "bad" quartos, even as that term is challenged.3 To adumbrate the most problematic features of Q1: signs of proofreading are few and many passages are garbled; prose lines are capitalized, thus suggesting verse; verse lines are frequently mislineated (printing, e.g., two pentameter lines as a hexameter and a tetrameter); the quality of the writing is radically uneven; and plotting is inadequate and inconsistent. When Q1 is compared with the other texts, additional problems appear: it is little more than half the length of F and Q2; names and titles are inconsistent (in the case of Polonius and Reynaldo, entirely different); several scenes differ in placement or content (for example, Hamlet ponders whether "To be, or not to be" and raves at Ophelia before rather than after he first encounters Gilderstone and Rossencraft or the players, and Laertes does not lead a rebellion against the king); and in a scene unique to Q1, the queen learns from Horatio, who trusts her loyalty to Hamlet, of Claudius's attempt on Hamlet's life.4

Despite these problematic features, the quarto's title page claims to offer the play "As it hath beene diuerse times acted by his Highnesse seruants in the Cittie of London: as also in the two Vniuersities of Cambridge and Oxford, and else-where." Granted that the title page may be no more than an advertising puff, unacceptable as hard evidence of Q1's performance history;5 that *Hamlet* on the page can only approximate individual *Hamlets* on the stage; and that theatrical researchers have yet to discover Q1's performance sites.
"else-where." Notwithstanding, even in our own time Q1 has proven to be a playable text, and chances are that it was indeed played as the title page claims, not only before but also after publication. But where else besides "the Cittie of London" and the "Vniuersities"? Questions about playing venues for Q1 are, I suggest, linked to the characterization of Gertred, the cultural production of a particular historical moment. To that end, my essay contextualizes Gertred's representation, seeing her as a quasi-allegorical object lesson in the consequences of rejecting celibate widowhood. Hers is a story, I argue, that validates the deeply rooted, lingering prejudice against remarrying widows. Where Q1 was played enters into this story.

The First Quarto of Hamlet: Reforming Widow Gertred: I. Widows and Remarriage

Although some twenty-five to thirty-five percent of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century English marriages were remarriages, censuring remarriage was tantamount to a convention for early modern writers. Pernicious clichés about widows (but not widowers) are found in polemics, and can be household manuals, and plays of the period and can be explained politically, in that, of the socially endorsed roles available to women—maid, wife, widow—the last is most perplexing for patriarchal theory. Solanio's quip in The Merchant of Venice about a hypocritical widow who "made her neighbors believe she wept for the death of a third husband" (3.1.9-10) reminds us that widowhood is problematic because the weaker vessel survives the stronger but because she may remarry, thus, some would say, cuckolding her former husband(s), albeit belatedly. In consequence, remarrying widows are liable to be figured as "lusty widows."

Of some thirty-one widows in Shakespeare, ten remarry—Elizabeth Woodville, Anne Neville, Tamora, Hortensio's wife, Hostess Quickly, Gertrude, Mistress Overdone, Cleopatra, Octavia, and Cymbeline's Queen; one might also include Lear's Regan, who intended to remarry. These, lusty or not, were more liable to wed calamity than joy. Six of them die—or seven, if we include Regan. Two of them are killed by their husbands (Anne by Richard III and Gertrude by Claudius), and two die by their own hands (Cleopatra and Cymbeline's Queen). For the survivors the future is less than reassuring: Elizabeth Woodville, widowed yet again, has also lost her sons and brother; Hortensio's wife, having publicly discomfited her new husband, has gotten the marriage off to an unpromising start; Mistress Overdone, nine times a bride but "Overdone by the last" (Measure for Measure, 2.1.202), remains in prison; and Octavia, deserted by Antony, is an object of pity in Rome. Little wonder that Paulina remains silent when Camillo is thrust upon her. Because remarrying widows consistently fare ill, genre as the determinant of their destinies seems less relevant than a residual ideology of revered celibacy which the widows have violated, even though both desire and economics encouraged the Elizabethan social practice of remarriage.

In Chaucer's "Merchant's Tale," while we are invited to scoff at January's wishes for his young wife, May, his words nevertheless voice a widespread medieval ideal of widowhood:

For neither after his deeth nor in his lyf
Ne wolde he that she were love ne wyf,
But evere lyve as wydwe in clothes blake,
Soul as the turtle that lost hath hire make.

These lines echo Catholic discourse on proper behavior for the devout. Following biblical, apocryphal, and patristic writings, the Church allowed but denigrated remarriage. In Leviticus 21:14 the widow is grouped with the divorced woman, the profane woman, and the harlot as an inappropriate wife. Paul honored pious matrons who were "widows indeed"; those over sixty who had been married only once were deemed fit to join the congregation (1 Timothy 5:3, 5, 9). Asserting that Jerome implied a similar binarism when he wrote "Fly the company of those widdowes, who are widdowes not in will, but of a kind of necessity," Father Fulvius Androtius, a Jesuit, describes "the Mantle and the Ring," a rite honoring the patristic view and celebrated in
England from about 660 AD until the establishment of the Anglican Church. In this rite widows who had remained celibate for a number of years after the death of their first husbands knelt before the high alter during the Mass. After vowing never to remarry on pain of punishment by the Church, each widow was clothed by the bishop in a consecrated black mantle. On her fourth finger he placed a silver or gold wedding band, and over her head a veil. The bishop then blessed the widow as a sacred person, and Te Deum laudamus was sung before the widow was accompanied to her home by two pious matrons. It is note-worthy that her habitlike apparel did not signify the widow's mourning for the loss of her husband but rather her perpetual mourning for sin—her own and that of others. That the celibacy of a widow who had been unhappily married would be more an act of will than of sorrow presented no problem. Inclusivity promoted participation in the rite.

Both Torquato Tasso and Juan Luis Vives wrote out of this Catholic tradition of celibacy for the widowed. Although unwilling to blame those who remarry, in "The Father of the Family" (1580) Tasso instructs widowers as well as widows that "the happiest are still those who have been bound by the marriage knot only once in their lives"; for Tasso "once the knot that binds a soul to a body is dissolved, that particular soul cannot be joined to any other body … and therefore it also seems fitting that the woman or man whose first marriage knot has been dissolved by death should not form a second." Writing under Catherine of Aragon for the edification of Mary, Vives, on this issue a doctrinal conservative, expresses similar sentiments. In his influential Instruction of a Christen Woman, written in 1523 and translated from the Latin some six years later, Vives, like Tasso, holds that marriage is a spiritual union continuing after death. A truly Christian widow sought no second husband but Christ. Approvingly, Vives quotes Jerome's advice to Furia "on the Duty of Remaining a Widow," agreeing that lust is the real motive of remarrying widows, whatever other reasons they may allege: "For none of you [widows] take a husband but to the intent that she will lie with him nor except her lust prick her." Unlike the lusty widow, the celibate widow was serviceable to the community both as a philanthropist (if wealthy) and as an intercessor. As Androtius wrote:

It was an ancient custome in our Hand (and the same continueth in some parts of Germany vntill this day) that in tyme of warre, plagues, famyne, or of any publicke necessity, there were in many Citties and Townes a certaine number of widdowes ordayned to watch & pray continually, night and day, in the Churches, by their turns or courses, one or more togeather: because it was held, that their prayers were of more efficacy, and power with Almighty God, to asswage his wrath, then the prayers of other common people, as persons dedicated wholy to his seruice, by the obseruation of Continency, in their Chaste, and Holy widdowhood.

The Epistle Dedicatory reminds readers that "Virginity, and Widdowhood, haue euer been accounted Sisters, and betroathed to the same Eternali Spouse Christ Iesus," and Androtius himself, looking back over the past five hundred years, takes pride in the more than thirty widowed English queens who either became nuns or lived the remainder of their lives as secular chaste widows. It is the latter choice that Gertred seems to be gesturing toward once apprised of Claudius's crime.

Even after the Reformation stripped marriage of its status as a sacrament, many sixteenth-century English writers were loath to abandon earlier attitudes. John Webster, the probable author of the thirty-two New Characters appearing in the sixth edition of Overbury's Characters (1615), set "A vertuous Widdow" in opposition to "An ordinarie Widdow." Shunning remarriage, the "vertuous Widdow," whose celibacy is a second virginity, garners up her heart in her children and her Maker. Of particular importance to Hamlet, neither her children's persons nor their inheritance is at the mercy of a new husband or step-siblings. Several generations after the first edition of Vives's Instruction appeared, Middleton wrote More Dissemblers Besides Women (c. 1623), in which the Duke of Milan instructs his wife,

For once to marry
Is honourable in woman, and her ignorance
Stands for a virtue, coming new and fresh;
But second marriage shows desire in flesh;
Thence lust, and heat, and common custom
grows. …

(2.1.76-80)²²

The Duke may have been self-serving, but he voices persistent conventional sentiments.

Most Protestant thinkers and polemicists, perhaps suspicious of celibacy as smacking of Catholicism, or fearing fornication, or desiring male control over the widow's wealth, knew in principle that they should feel differently. Even while urging remarriage, however, they could not escape its age-old coding as a betrayal of the deceased. The aporia between Sir Walter Ralegh's two statements on this point exemplifies an ineradicable ambivalence within the culture. In 1603, expecting to be executed and realizing that his wife would need protection from his enemies, he advised her to remarry, "for that will be best for you, both in respect of God and the world."²³ But later he was to cringe at the prospect of a Ralegh widow's wedded bliss and counseled his son, as one testator to another, "if she [the son's wife] love again, let her not enjoy her second love in the same bed wherein she loved thee. … "²⁴ Ambivalence toward remarriage was most apt to become condemnation when widows no longer young thought to love again. Their breach of a generational boundary might offend both Catholics and Protestants, but especially the former, taught to prize celibacy. Reformed preachers, on the other hand, devising a theology out of difference, were prone to foster Thomas Becon's belief "that second marriages were never disallowed 'tyl the Deuyl and the Pope began to beare rule, whiche enuye no State so much, as the holy state of honorable Matrimonye."²⁵

The First Quarto of Hamlet: Reforming Widow Gertred: II.
The Widow Gertred

Significantly, whatever Ql's relationship to Q2 and F Hamlet—whether Ql was itself reformed from an early version of the play and precedes Q2 or is a later version of the Q2 or F texts—an early modern audience would find little in Gertred's onstage words or actions to substantiate the prejudice against remarriage. So dependent is Gertred, Claudius's pale accessory and echo, that she appears foreordained to remarry. Her precipitate second marriage casts her as a lusty widow, but despite the stereotype, her speeches and actions are characterized almost exclusively by meekness and silence. For one thing, Gertred is neutralized politically, being largely overlooked by Claudius and slighted by Corambis.²⁶ Yet silence seems as much native to her as imposed by others' disregard. Gertrard/Gertrude's plea to Hamlet (Q2/F1TLN 248-53 and 255-56) to end his mourning does not appear in Ql;²⁷ Gertred speaks only two lines in the entire scene, begging Hamlet to stay (Q1CLN 194-95). Her words follow and summarize two longer speeches by Claudius in which he entreats Hamlet to remain in Denmark as "the Ioy and halfe heart of your mother" (Q1CLN 176), this phrase itself underlining Gertred's domestic, maternal role. Welcoming Rossencraft and Gilderstone, Gertred speaks but one line of thanks (Q1CLN 734), echoing Claudius; she greets Corambis's announcement that he has discovered the cause of Hamlet's madness with "God graunt he hath" (Q1CLN 746), a sentiment both exemplary and concise. She urges the same concision on Corambis—"Good my Lord be briefe" (Q1CLN 781)—and exits at his request (Q1CLN 833). When Claudius promises lasting thanks to Rossencraft and Gilderstone, thinking them responsible for Hamlet's high spirits, Gertred again ventures no more than a two-line echo (Q1CLN 1182-83). In another two lines she agrees to see the play, saying "it ioyes me at the soule / He is inclin'd to any kinde of mirth" (Q1CLN 1186-87). At Corambis's and Claudius's request, she also agrees to summon Hamlet and question him while Corambis eavesdrops on his reply: "With all my heart, soone will I send for him" (Q1CLN 1202). No small part of why Gertred impresses us as "a relatively passive mirror of events, a surface without independent motives for action,"²⁸ is her possessing in quantity the silence thought so proper to womankind: foremost among "The infallible markes of a vertuous woman," writes Barnabe Rich in 1613, are "bashfullnes, [and] silence … She must not bee a vaine talker."²⁹
In addition, Rich counsels the virtuous woman to be "tractable to her husband." Her own subjectivity undeveloped, Gertred is scripted as tractable to everyone; she is a peacemaker as well. To placate Laertes, she tries to explain away Hamlet's behavior at Ofelia's grave; she concurs with Claudius's feigned desire that Laertes and Hamlet reconcile: "God grant they may" (Q1CLN 2082). She disobeys Claudius only as she attempts to protect him from Laertes. She does not disobey when she drinks from the poisoned cup; in Ql Gertred drinks before Claudius orders her not to:

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Queene Here Hamlet, thy mother drinkes to thee.

Shee drinkes.

King Do not drinke Gertred: O t'is the poysned cup!

(Q1CLN 2160-62)
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Unlike Gertrard/Gertrude of Q2 and Fl, Gertred could never be construed as a conscious site of resistance to social expectations. She is not self-willed; she makes no suggestions; and she is quick to fall in with the plans of others. But so tractable a wife to her second husband logically must have been no less compliant as the widow of her first. The virtue of female submissiveness proves itself a two-edged sword when the ideological goal is marital fidelity undaunted by the husband's death. Gertred's behavior throughout the play beckons us to read her acquiescence to a questionable and sudden second marriage as the corollary of an otherwise praiseworthy habit of obedience to male authority.

Just as Gertred's actions are marked by compliance, so her language is informed by piety. She typically alludes to her prayers and her soul, invokes God and heaven, and makes sacred vows. Her protestation of innocence is an oath: "But as I haue a soule, I sweare by heauen, /I neuer knew of this most horride murder" (Q1CLN 1582-83). She calls on God (as Bel-imperia, from whom the lines are lifted, does not) to witness her loyalty to Hamlet:

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Hamlet, I vow by that maiesty,
That knowes our thoughts, and lookes into our hearts,
I will conceale, consent, and doe my best,
What stratagem soe're thou shalt deuise.

(Q1CLN 1594-97)
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When Claudius hopes "to heare good newes from thence [England] ere long, / If euery thing fall out to our content" (Q1CLN 1678-79), Gertred devoutly observes, "God grant it may, heau'ns keep my Hamlet safe" (Q1CLN 1681). In fact, G. B. Shand observes that, "although her role is just over half the size of the Q2/F1 Gertrude, she has three times the number of references to God, heaven, her soul, and prayer, culminating in this vow to Hamlet [at CLN 1594-97]." All these iterations both sanitize Gertred and associate her with a comfit-maker's wife, making it difficult for an audience to believe that she would have committed adultery, and underscoring her innocence but for her misguided remarriage.

Silence, obedience, piety—such qualities become all Elizabethan women; when motherly concern and celibacy (a strong possibility for Gertred after the closet scene) are joined to these virtues, we confront the model Catholic widow, a "widow indeed." Gertred's bland words and actions are always decorous—she describes Ofelia's death with no unseemly references to "long Purples" or "liberall Shepheards" (Q2/F1TLN 3161-62)—and always maternal. Gertred stakes her only claim to importance on her position as Hamlet's mother. In her closet Gertred shows the first signs of self-regard when, in reply to Hamlet's stichomythic "Mother, you haue my father much offended," she demands, "How now boy?" (Q1CLN 1498-99). In other words, her sole demand for respect is for deference to her maternal authority. Again, while Gertred's account
of the murder of Polonius is similar to that in Q2 and F1, the unique lines "But then he throwes and tosses me about, / As one forgetting that I was his mother" (Q1CLN 1607-8) intimate astonishment that Hamlet could so disregard her parental status. When Hamlet returns to Denmark, she asks Horatio to "command me / A mothers care to him, bid him a while / Be wary of his presence, lest that he / Faile in that he goes about" (Q1CLN 1826-29). When Gertred learns of the fate of Gilderstone and Rosencraft, she thanks heaven for preserving Hamlet, sending him "thowsand mothers blessings" (Q1CLN 1843). Offering Hamlet her napkin to wipe his sweaty face is another gesture of concern. Gertred toasts her son, saying "Here Hamlet, thy mother drinks to thee" (Q1CLN 2160)—"thy mother" rather than "The Queene" (Q2/F1TLN 3758). Overall Q1 presents a cohesive enough but neutral character who is neither temptress nor villain; she does and says what is expected of her and little more. In this regard Q1 seems less misogynistic than Q2/F1, but because the price of being more "sympathetic" than her counterparts is a lack of vitality and distinctiveness, one might more accurately conclude that Q1 merely wears its misogyny with a difference.

Gertred's behavior may be well intentioned and in keeping with Elizabethan social codes, but it is not entirely appropriate to a queen regnant. Pitying the mad Ofelia, "poore maide" (Q1CLN 1684), Gertred does not at first refuse to see her, as in Q2/F1, or stop to consider the political wisdom of seeing her, as in F1; Gertred is both less tortured and less politically sophisticated than her counterparts. A significant discrepancy between Q1 and Q2/F1 is Q1's omission of the speech in which Claudius describes Gertrude as "Th'Imperiall Ioyntresse of this warlike State" (Q2/F1TLN 179-203), a queen he married while still in mourning but—he claims—with the consent of his advisers. Gertred's rank seems secondary rather than integral to her role; compared with the business of Norway, Claudius's marriage to Gertred seems inconsequential since undeserving of comment. Again, in Q1's prayer scene Claudius does not speak of murdering for "My Crowne, mine owne Ambition, and my Queene" (Q2/F1TLN 2331). Q1's audience would not likely conclude that longing for Gertred led Claudius to kill his brother; rather, she becomes a benefit incidental to the crown. Neither is Q1's Gertred "so coniunctiue [Q2 conclue] to my life and soule;/ That as the Starre moues not but in his Sphere,/ I could not but by her" (Q2/F1TLN 3022-24). In place of Gertrard/Gertrude's power over Claudius, Q1 Hamlet's description of Claudius's villainous appearance intimates Claudius's power over Gertred: "A looke fit for a murder and a rape,/ A dull dead hanging looke, and a hell-bred eie,/ To affright children and amaze the world" (Q1CLN 1528-30). Hamlet believes that his mother was cozened by a devil (Q1CLN 1532).

But whether she was cozened or not, Hamlet's soliloquy over "this too much grieu'd and sallied flesh" (Q1CLN 202) and the Ghost's diatribe against his "most seeming vertuous Queene" (Q1CLN 516), although compressed, level every charge against Gertred that is found in the other Hamlet texts. Gertred was seduced not by Claudius's "wicked Wit" (Q2/F1TLN 731) but by his "wicked will," his desire—that "and gifts!" (Q1CLN 515). Yet what would a queen lack, what requirements of hers are we to imagine as having been in such short supply, that Claudius's gifts would so easily move her? Surely if we are to believe the Ghost's account of his brother's successful courtship, a courtship in which Claudius "bought" Gertred's love, it is important to note that the gifts in themselves could not matter except as signifiers of Claudius's desire, a reassurance to Gertred that she is not yet the "matron" (Q1CLN 1547; Q2/F1TLN 2458) that in all three texts Hamlet would have her be, whose "appetite … is in the waine," whose "blood runnes backward now from whence it came" (Q1CLN 1544-45). But clinging to youth and marrying while newly bereft and most vulnerable to Claudius's will do not mitigate Gertred's fault. As in Q2 and F1, she is likened to "Lust … [that would] prey on garbage" (Q1CLN 519-21). Only if Gertred assists Hamlet's vengeance can her "infamy" die with Claudius (Q1CLN 1593). Yet while the play's audience, familiar with the trope of the lusty widow and positioned to identify with the protagonist, may accede to the assessment of Gertred they hear from Hamlet and the Ghost, the queen they actually witness is apt to strike them as a basically decent, rather ordinary woman, able to accept guidance from her son and willing to mend her ways. In particular this latter response might well prevail with playgoers who—unlike us—do not already know the Gertrard/ Gertrude of Q2/F1 conflations.
Although the character of Gertred appears straightforwardly drawn when compared to the queens in Q2 and Fl, her representation is still complicated by underlying sexual issues. Was Gertred—however religious and domesticated—an adulteress? Although QI's Ghost charges Claudius with "incestuous" acts (Q1CLN 514), he does not, like the Ghost in Q2/F1, immediately follow this adjective with "adulterate" (Q2/F1TLN 729). And yet in his soliloquy Claudius refers to "the adulterous fault I haue committed" (Q1CLN 1462). Does he mean that, as in Belleforest, he slept with the queen before killing his brother or that he merely wished to? Perhaps the king follows the notion of adultery expounded in Matthew 5:28: "But I say vnto you, y[th] hoseouer loketh on a woma[n] to lust after her, hathe cõmitted adulterie w\[t] her already in his heart."\[^{34}\] Hamlet also admonishes Gertred to "Forbear the adulterous bed to night" (Q1CLN 1589). This evidence suggests that the QI text may be using adulterous inter-changeably with incestuous, an incestuous union being adulterous in the sense defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as "spurious, counterfeit, adulterate" or in any way reprehensible.\[^{35}\]

There is also the question of whether Gertred sleeps with Claudius after the closet scene. Since the Hamlet texts don't provide a definitive answer, directors often signify their decisions through costuming; a high neck-line and somber gown make one point, décolletage another. Is Gertred, like Richard Ill's Anne, reluctantly flattered to think, whether rightly or not, that a man would kill her husband to gain her? Does Claudius please Gertred? Hamlet draws him as not only a moral but a physical monster yet insists that Gertred lives "in the incestuous pleasure of his bed" (Q1CLN 1535, my emphasis). The paradox is explicated by Steven Mullaney in his analysis of the mother/son dynamics of Q2/F1 Hamlet. Mullaney sees Hamlet as obsessively disgusted with "Gertrude's aging sexuality, conceived at times as a contradiction in terms, at times as a violation of [Gertrude's] own body akin in its unnaturalness to a rebellion in the body politic: hers is a passion that 'canst mutine in a matron's bones' ... at once unimaginable and yet impossible not to imagine and visualize in graphic detail."\[^{36}\] For Hamlet, in all three texts of the play, his mother's sexuality is perverse, hence her perverse pleasure in his monstrous uncle.

Gertred's integrity is also under assault from QI's unique plot twist. In order to "conceale, consent, and doe my best, / What stratagem soe're thou [Hamlet] shalt deuise" (Q1CLN 1596-97), she must "soothe and please him [Claudius] for a time" (Q1CLN 1820). Compelled to dissimulate, she recalls Titus Andronicus's "High-witted Tamora," resolved "to gloze with all" (4.4.35), thus deceiving Titus: "For I can smooth and fill his aged ears / With golden promises" (11.96-97). In fact, Tamora and Cymbeline's wicked Queen are also remarried widows, reprehensible not least for dissimulating with their husbands in a patriarchal society, with their sovereigns in a monarchical one. Gertred undeniably has need of guile once she knows Claudius to be the murderer of his brother and the potential murderer of her son, but the hypocrisy to which she pledges herself is an unstable indicator of moral fiber. The action of QI may be more straightforward than that of the other versions, the queen's role a main cause of QI's direct telling of the story, but Gertred herself is not represented as direct; the plot allows her repentance but denies her full integrity. The fact that, despite her passivity and blandness, Gertred contains traces of the ambiguity associated with Gertrard/Gertrude demonstrates that the reformed lusty widow is a slippery role. QI refuses to negotiate the ramifications of that role, but the tension between the Gertreds of the play's surface and subtext also reminds us that QI is a palimpsest in which Hamlet's sources are written over but never entirely obscured.

The First Quarto of Hamlet: Reforming Widow Gertred: III.
"Else-Where"

III. "Else-Where"

From the characterization of Gertred, who behaves much like her counterpart in the play's sources, one might infer that QI preceded the later printings of Hamlet—the assumption being that the more closely a particular version adheres to its sources, the earlier the text is apt to be.\[^{37}\] In any event, focusing on Gertred as a step toward unraveling the relationship between the various Hamlet texts suggests that wherever else besides "the
Cittie of London" and the "Vniuersities" Q1 may have been played, it especially lent itself to performance
where ideas about the sacred nature of celibacy and the faithful widow lingered longest. Indisputably, on its
surface Q1 holds the queen to a very narrow standard of chastity. Although in all three texts the
Dutchesse/Player Queen brands a remarrying widow a murderer—"A second time, I kill my Husband [Q1 :
Lord that's] dead, / When second Husband kisses me in Bed" (Q2/F1TLN 2052-53; Q1CLN 1327-28)—the
Dutchesse's explicit death wish is unique to Q1: "When death takes you, let life from me depart" (CLN
1321).\(^{38}\) Subject to so demanding a code, Gertred's guilt does not lie in when she remarried or whom she
remarried; that she remarried at all condemns her. By attempting to reform the lusty widow and prodigal
mother, by presenting the audience with a good woman gone wrong—"her sex is weake" (Q1CLN 1566)—
then showing her the error of remarriage and aligning her with her son, Q1 depicts a queen well suited to
audiences dedicated to the old religion and its values, one who could be considered a "Catholic" Gertred.

Keith Wrightson, discussing the general survival of Catholic beliefs and practices in the 1580s and '90s,
quotes a Puritan estimate that three out of four English subjects were "wedded to their old superstition
still."\(^{39}\) However exaggerated, given Puritan animosities, that ratio may offer some leads to the locations of
"elsewhere," both before and after the publication of Q1. Whether one favored formal Catholic doctrine or
simply craved familiar rites and rituals, nostalgia for the past lent itself to antireform sentiments prepetuating
the esteem in which the ideal of celibate widowhood was held. Such sentiments, though shared by people of
many shades of Christian belief, were inevitably Catholic in origin, and most likely to appeal to Catholics.
Between 1594 and 1603 the Lord Chamberlain's Men are known to have traveled no further north than
Cambridge;\(^{40}\) thus a conservative surmise as to Q1's possible prepublication enactment sites would be
confined to those counties in the south and midlands most closely tied to their Catholic past. According to
Roland G. Usher, Hereford, Gloucester, Worcester, Cornwall, and southern Wales (Monmouth and
Glamorgan) were all heavily Catholic (thirty to forty percent) in 1603.\(^{41}\)

Candidates for "else-where" would include the first four counties, all accessible from London and Oxford,
where the the title page claims Q1 had been performed.\(^{42}\) Within those counties, the towns of Gloucester,
Worcester, and Leominster had hosted theatrical performances by the Queen's Men between 1583 and 1603.
In the last decade of the century, Worcester's Men had also played at Gloucester and Leominster.\(^{43}\) Could not
the Chamberlain's Men have played at one or more of these towns as well?

Also, not without interest is Q1's postpublication history. If the travels of the play were to a marked extent
dictated by its affinity with audiences favoring traditional ways of thinking, it would appear likely that Q1 was
played in the north, the area of England historically most reluctant to abandon Catholicism. Durham and York
were important sites of the 1536 Pilgrimage of Grace; a generation later the peasantry supported the rising of
the northern earls—Thomas Percy, seventh earl of Northumberland, and Charles Neville, sixth earl of
Westmorland—in another attempt to restore Catholicism. During Elizabeth's reign York could claim more of
its sons ordained abroad as priests than any other county; Lancashire, the runner-up, harbored the most
recusants.\(^{44}\) The Corpus Christi play lingered until the 1580s in Newcastle-upon-Tyne,\(^{45}\) until the end of the
century in the Lake District and Lancashire,\(^{46}\) and until 1605 in Kendal, Westmorland.\(^{47}\) Westmorland and
Cumberland border one of the ecclesiastical divisions of Lancashire, the deanery of Furness; in these counties,
as in nearby Durham and Northumberland, many remained if not strongly recusant—a choice that by 1581
nominally entailed impoverishment and imprisonment—minimally Anglican, privately Catholic.\(^{48}\)

Of course, whether Q1 was acted in the north and, if so, by whom are matters for speculation.\(^{49}\) Even so, it
may be helpful to explore one possibility regarding Q1's provenance by juxtaposing our knowledge of attitudes
toward widows against some facts and theories concerning provincial performance. Most companies traveled
at least during the summers; outbreaks of plague between 1603 and 1609 compelled the King's Men to travel
in 1606, perhaps for as long as half the year. In August of 1606 and again in 1619, the King's Men toured as
far afield as Leicester. Between 1609 and 1612 three records attest to their touring further north and west to
Shrewsbury, and twice they continued north to Stafford. In 1615 they played at Nottingham and Congleton.\(^{50}\)
While we might expect that, as Shakespeare's company grew measurably more successful, they would have been spared arduous tours to remote locations, the reverse is true. Or rather, as Alan Somerset proposes, touring may have been something of a vacation, and not just a summer one, that paid for itself, as well as a service to the realm which King James expected of "his" players and which the provinces keenly anticipated. REED editor Sally-Beth MacLean concurs: "The appearance, for the first time, of Congleton in Cheshire on the 1615 circuit underlines the addition of a northwestern route through Shrewsbury, which figures frequently in the schedule of the King’s Men from 1603 onwards." Regrettably, the titles of the plays the King's Men Performed in the north have not survived, and we have no record of any northern productions of Hamlet. Yet its performance is not precluded: records are scant, and frequently either the names of the acting companies or the names of the plays performed or both are missing from the municipalities' records. If "strolling" was not necessarily a risky, unpleasant experience that obliged players "to trauel vpon the hard hoofe from village to village for chees & buttermilke," the King's Men themselves might have taken Q1 Hamlet north.

What northern audiences and authorities, by no means monolithic, would have expected of strollers and whether the First Quarto would have succeeded remain subjects for inquiry, but we can be reasonably assured that for nonconformists who remained attached to Catholicism, as opposed to nonconformists of the Puritan persuasion, playgoing was no sin; northern venues inhospitable to Puritan reform persisted in welcoming players well into the 1630s. Thanks to data from the Records of Early English Drama project, we are aware of players traveling north to Carlisle in Cumberland—some thirty-four troupes between 1602 and 1639—and performing at York, Kendal, Durham, Newcastle, and numerous towns and manors in Lancashire, tours in part made possible by the patronage of various noble households (Lowther, Curwen, Howard, and Clifford) that supplemented the payments of town officials. For example, unidentified plays were performed for Richard Shuttleworth in Lancashire's Gawthorpe Hall by Lord Derby's Men in 1609; by Lord Dudley's Men and Lord Mounteagle's Men in 1610, 1612, and 1616; by Lord Stafford's Men (twice), Derby's, and an unknown company in 1617; and by Queen Anne's Men and an unknown company in 1618. The Clifford-family accounts from 1607 to 1639 show the fourth earl of Cumberland and his son Henry, Lord Clifford, being visited by these and other troops of strolling players at their three family seats in the north: Londes-borough, slightly east of York; Skipton Castle, not far from Gawthorpe Hall; and Hazelwood Castle, midway between Londesborough and Gawthorpe. Aside from providing room and board, the earl paid £1-£2 to hear a play, and his guests may have added tips; even when he declined performances, he tipped 10s-13s. Gratuities such as these produced further impetus for northern touring. It is true that we have no record of the King's Men going north. But after publication, once in the public domain, Q1 need not have been performed by the King's Men. Rather, any number of companies that customarily toured the north could have played it. Furthermore, the publication of Q2 would not have abrogated the usefulness of Q1 to the King's Men or to any other acting company. The First Quarto is still praised for its theatrical energy despite its pedestrian and often mangled verse; if nothing else, this version of Hamlet is fast-moving.

Janis Lull, who accepts the memorial-reconstruction theory, finds that Q1's reporter/author(s), preferring an earlier feudal ethic, were capable of "selectively forgetting parts of Hamlet that allude to Protestant ideology." Catholic references common to all the Hamlet texts are less problematic in Q1, which seems theologically more of a piece than the other versions of the play. Most Q1 spectators are less bound to feel a Reformation sensibility at war with so important an element as the purgatorial Catholic Ghost, in part because the depiction of the reformed Gertred that an audience most immediately apprehends, the Gertred of the text's surface, is one more aspect of a version of Hamlet endorsing an older order of things: the soundness of Pauline doctrine, the wisdom of widowed celibacy. Admittedly, some Catholic playgoers might have preferred a more ambiguous queen on whom they could project the utmost moral deformity, that is, a Gertrard/ Gertrude; moreover, to entertain a hypothesis privileging the representation of a single character in order to solve the mystery of an unsupported claim, "acted … else-where," requires an act of faith. Nevertheless, if only for lack of sufficient external evidence about Q1, textual critics may find these conjectures useful, Gertred being a focal point of Hamlet's psychic life, and the title-page claim having yet to
be disproved. Alan Somerset submits that an important benefit of traveling may have been to free the actors from taking chances on the success of new plays. Instead the actors needed to perform only those plays sure to please. To go a step further, I submit that just as actors may have been typecast, or roles created to suit the talents of specific actors, so playtexts may have been chosen or adapted to "fit" specific audiences. Of course, reforming the lusty widow may not have been a deliberate ploy but rather the inadvertent result of cuts meant to achieve dramatic economy. In such a case we might conclude that if a Catholic audience liked QI, the (un)reformed Gertred is a prominent part of why they liked it. On the other hand, in light of Gertred's construction and emplotment, together with the selective exercise of forgetting Protestant concepts, it is worth considering the hypothesis that the ideology of QI Hamlet was strategically finetuned for performance before a particular audience in particular regions.

Notes

My thanks to Professors Alan Dessen, Guy Hamel, and especially Paul Werstine for their responses to an early draft of this paper, written for the session chaired by Kathleen Irace, "Revision and Adaptation in Shakespeare's Two- and Three-Text Plays," at the 1994 annual meeting of the Shakespeare Association of America, Albuquerque, New Mexico. I am also indebted to my friends Professors Thomas Moisan and Susan Baker for reading my revisions and adaptations.

1 See, for example, Kathleen Irace, "Origins and Agents Q1 Hamlet" in The Hamlet First Published (Q1, 1603): Origins, Form, Intertextualities, Thomas Clayton, ed. (Netwark: U of Delaware P; London and Toronto: Associated University Presses, 1992), 90-122, esp. 106. Steven Urkowitz finds a more harmonious and trusting relationship between the queen and Hamlet in Q1 than in the alternative texts; see "Well-sayd olde Mole': Burying Three Hamlets in Modern Editions" in Shakespeare Study Today: The Horace Howard Furness Memorial Lectures, Georgianna Ziegler, ed. (New York: AMS Press, 1986), 37-70, esp. 48-49.


3 Philip Edwards, editor of the New Cambridge Hamlet (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1985), describes Q1 as a "bad" quarto: "a corrupt, unauthorised version of an abridged version of Shakespeare's play" (9) and claims, more specifically, that Q1 "inherits the cuts and changes made in the early playhouse transcript, and demonstrates that the transcript was in progress towards the Globe's official promptbook. ... [Perhaps] it reflects the shortened acting version of Shakespeare's own theatre" (30). In his "Narratives About Printed Shakespearean Texts: 'Foul Papers' and 'Bad' Quartos" (Shakespeare Quarterly 41 [1990]: 65-86), Paul Werstine argues against just such a practice of textual constructivism by which scholars mistake dubious hypotheses of origin for historical fact.


5 The fact that the Privy Council reprimanded Cambridge in 1593 for the ineffectuality of its efforts to suppress dramatic performances within five miles of the university bespeaks play production despite the Council's decree (Alan H. Nelson, ed., Records of Early English Drama: Cambridge, 2 vols. [Toronto, Buffalo, and London: U of Toronto P, 1989], 1:348). Moreover, Hibbard's persuasive explanation of the unsuitability of the names Polonius and Reynaldo for performance at Oxford goes some way toward affirming the title-page performance claims for that university as well (74-75). But see Ioppolo's suggestion to the contrary (135-36). Certainly a play about students on leave from their university who intrigue to catch a murderer before he catches them could hardly fail to appeal to a student audience.
6 See Bryan Loughrey, "Q1 in Recent Performance: An Interview" in Clayton, ed., 123-36; and Michael Muller, "Director's Notes [on Hamlet, Quarto 1]" in the program for the Shakespeare in the Park 1992 production, Fort Worth, Texas, 12.


8 For the most recent study of this extensive body of material, see the first three chapters of Elizabeth Thompson Oakes's 1990 Vanderbilt University dissertation, 'Heiress, Beggar, Saint, or Strumpet: The Widow in Society and on the Stage in Early Modern England." Three earlier dissertations treat widowlore: Linda Bensel-Meyers, "A 'Figure Cut in Alabaster': The Paradoxical Widow of Renaissance Drama" (University of Oregon, 1985); Roger Alfred MacDonald, "The Widow: A Recurring Figure in Jacobean and Caroline Comedy" (University of New Brunswick, Canada, 1978); and Katherine Harriett James, "The Widow in Jacobean Drama" (University of Tennessee, 1973). Also see Lu Emily Pearson, Elizabethtans at Home (Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 1957), 498-516; Ruth Kelso, Doctrine for the Lady of the Renaissance (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1956), 121-32 and 257-58; and Carroll Camden, The Elizabethan Woman: A Panorama of English Womanhood, 1540 to 1640 (London, New York, and Houston: Elsevier Press, 1952), passim.

9 This classification scheme is best known from Measure for Measure (1604), but Morris Palmer Tilley cites its appearance both earlier and later in Peele's Old Wives' Tale (c. 1590) and Rowley's All's Lost by Lust (1633); see A Dictionary of the Proverbs in England in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries: A Collection of the Proverbs Found in English Literature and the Dictionaries of the Period (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1950), 404, M26.


13 The ceremony of the mantle and the ring is described by Androtius on pages 341-48. According to Roger Alfred MacDonald, the ceremony is also alluded to in an anonymous 1525 play titled The Twelve Merry Jests of the Widow Edyth (65).
Androtius finds parallel practices honoring chaste widows in pagan Rome:

… when a widdow died, her head was adorned with a Crowne of Continency, and to [i.e., so] caryed in solemnne triumph to her graue.

The said Romans did also attribute another honour to the Continency of Widdowhood, which was, That on the wedding day, there were no women suffered to come neere, much lesse to touch the Bride, but only such as had beeene the wiues of one husband, to wit, such as had beeene but once married; comanding all that had beeene twice married (yea though they were Widdowes) to keep aloofe of, as prophane, impure, and fortelling of an euill fortune to the happynes of marriage.

(322-23)

14 In The Treasure of Vowed Chastity in Secular Persons, Lessius, expounding Paul's dictum that to marry is to have "trouble in the flesh" (1 Corinthians 7:28), depicts marriage as an inevitable disaster for both sexes (94-130).


17 Quoted in Klein, ed., 97-122, esp. 120 and 121, n. 110.

18 Androtius, 336-37.

19 From "The Epistle Dedicatory" to The Treasure of Vowed Chastity in Secular Persons by the translator, I.W.P.

20 Androtius, 332.


23 "Letter to Lady Ralegh, the night before he expected to be put to death, 1603" in Sir Walter Raleigh: Selected Writings, ed. Gerald Hammond (Manchester, UK: Carcanet Press, 1984), 276.


25 Quoted in Mikesell, 268.

26 G. B. Shand makes this point in an unpublished paper he kindly shared with me, "Queen of the First Quarto," delivered at the 1991 annual meeting of the Shakespeare Association of America, Vancouver, Canada.
27 I conflate Q2 and F thus (Q2/F1) when they duplicate each other aside from differences in line arrangement, capitalization, or spelling.


30 Hull, 196.

31 Recall that for Carolyn G. Heilbrun, writing in the 1950s, Gertrude is "strongminded, intelligent, succinct, and, apart from this passion [her refusal to abjure sexuality], sensible" ("The Character of Hamlet's Mother," SQ 8 [1957]: 201-6; rpt. in Heilbrun's Hamlet's Mother and Other Women [New York: Columbia UP, 1990], 9-17). Leslie A. Fiedler categorizes Gertrude as one of Shakespeare's "'antiwomen,' subverters of the role assigned to them by men who seek to naturalize their strangeness to a patriarchal world" (The Stranger in Shakespeare [New York: Stein and Day, 1972], 74); and Lisa Jardine calls Gertrude one of Shakespeare's "strong" women, a congener of Desdemona, Cleopatra, and Webster's Duchess of Malfi (Still Harping on Daughters: Women and Drama in the Age of Shakespeare [Sussex: The Harvester Press; Totowa, NJ: Barnes and Noble Books, 1983], 69).

32 Shand, 12.

33 If Q1's Hamlet is still in his teens, Gertred's protectiveness toward a son new to adulthood is all the more understandable. In Q1, Yoricke's skull "hath bin here this dozen [not twenty-three] yeare, / … euer since our last king Hamlet / Slew Fortenbrasse in combat" (Q1CLN 1987-89, my emphasis); however, the gravedigger says nothing about his length of service as sexton or the day of Hamlet's birth.


36 Mullaney, "Mourning and Misogyny: Hamlet, The Revenger's Tragedy, and the Final Progress of Elizabeth I, 1600-1607," SQ 45 (1994): 139-62, esp. 151. In the First Quarto, Hamlet expresses horror that "lust shall dwell within a matrons breast" (Q1CLN 1547), a sentiment that, like its Q2/F1 counterpart, invites Mullaney's reading of an obscene maternal desire thwarting filial mourning.

37 Steven Urkowitz advances this argument ("'Well-sayd olde Mole'" in Ziegler, ed., 48). Recognizing the early quality of Gertred, though not of Q1 as a whole, Philip Edwards agrees with George Duthie that Gertred may well be "a recollection of the old play of Hamlet" (25).

38 Juliet actively and Richard II's Duchess of Gloucester passively enact the widow's suicide, a European version of sati.

39 Keith Wrightson, English Society 1580-1680 (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 1982), 200. He explains that what these traditionalists, particularly the poor, missed most were protective rituals, without which they felt vulnerable and frightened (201). Q2 and F, but not Q1, remind their audiences of such rituals when the
Ghost deplores having died "Vnhuzled, disappointed, vnanueld" (Q2/F1TLN 762), i.e., without the Eucharist or the anointing essential to extreme unction. If the average person felt the loss of these rituals—communion in its Roman Catholic form and extreme unction—more than the loss of purgatory, a theological abstraction, it is conceivable that a censor or adapter alert to predictable social irritants may have cut this line from a text apt to be played for an audience dominated by Catholic sympathizers while allowing the Ghost's allusion to his abode, an integral part of the play, to stand. By the same token, could not state- or self-censorship explain the omission of Laertes's insurrection from a text to be played in an area known for its history of Catholic rebellion?


42 Although to date REED has found no evidence of the Lord Chamberlain's Men having played in any of these four counties, or, indeed, in any county that Usher estimates as more than fifteen percent Catholic, it should be noted that the REED project is ongoing and that MacLean's maps are part of a progress report rather than a definitive statement.

43 See "Map 4" and "Map 5" in MacLean, "Tour Routes," 6-7.


48 In *The English Catholic Community 1570-1850* Bossy provides a map showing the distribution of Catholics in 1641-42, in which recusant households exceed twenty percent only in the Welsh county of Monmouth and in the two northern counties of Lancashire and Durham (404).

49 Such speculations are complicated by the lack of any evidence for specific performances of QI, despite the general claims of its title page. Additionally, Janette Dillon reminds us that if QI is the memorial reconstruction of a performance, "it may in fact be further removed from performance than either the Second Quarto or the Folio texts by virtue of being subject to two degrees of intervention (memory and print) rather than one" ("Is There a Performance in this Text?" *SQ* 45 [1994]: 74-86, esp. 82).

they were at Skipton Castle in Craven District; in 1629 and 1631 in York; in 1634 in York and Doncaster; in 1635 in Newcastle; and in 1636 and 1638 again in York. The reference to Congleton is from MacLean, "Tour Routes."


52 MacLean, "Tour Routes," 10.

53 MacLean, "Players," 66.


55 The propriety of playgoing for priests has, however, been questioned. In his discussion of the theatergoing habits of London Catholics, Alfred Harbage quotes an interchange between Father Harrison and Father Thomas Leke, the one ordering the other to desist from attending the theater (though not necessarily from seeing plays at more respectable venues such as the court). Leke wrote in his own defense, "'Wee knowe, that most of the principal Catholicks about London doe goe to playes, and all for ye most part of my ghostly children do knowe that I sometimes goe, and are not scandalised.' To which Harrison rejoined: tatholicks that use to playes are the young of both sexes, and neither matrons, nor graue, or sage man is there seen" (*Shakespeare's Audience* [New York and London: Columbia UP, 1941], 72). Harbage doubts the validity of Harrison's observations; in any case, to insist on a distinction between playgoing juniors and stay-at-home seniors would seem less feasible in counties where theater's chief association was religious and where sources of entertainment were few. More likely, then as now, the whole community turned out when the Royal Nonsuch came to town.

56 MacLean, "Tour Routes," 10-11.

57 MacLean, "Players," 63-64.


60 Somerset, 59-60.


**Critical Essays: The Last Mystery**

*William Kerrigan, University of Massachusetts*
As I finished this book, I was visited by a friend of pragmatic temperament. "Yes, I suppose so," he said on hearing of my admiration for the scene between Hamlet and the gravedigger. "But I don't have the slightest idea what it means." What defeats my pragmatic friend, I think, is that the graveyard scene offers nothing but meaning. With respect to the battle between Hamlet and Claudius, it accomplishes nothing. Hamlet does not form a plan. He does not happen on useful information. Shakespeare, grandly at his leisure, finds time to bring Hamlet and Horatio, eventually the entire Danish court and the mortal remains of Ophelia, to the local graveyard—only the second scene in the play (the first is 4.2, its local unspecified) set outside Elsinore Castle. Two months or so before the play begins, Hamlet returned from Wittenberg to attend his father's funeral, which might have been held on this very ground.1 "Foul deeds will rise;/ Though all the earth o'erwhelm them, to men's eyes" (1.3.257-58). Hamlet is thinking of his father rising from the earth of his grave; when he first sees the ghost, he refers to it as a "dead corse" (I.4.52). Shakespeare reassembles his characters on the graveyard from which the foul deeds rose. It is where they are destined to go, and will go again when their dead bodies are heaped on a stage at the end of the play. The graveyard comes before the beginning, before the end, after the end. This scene does not advance the plot but stretches it out from dust to dust.

When I remarked in [an earlier chapter] that 3.4 was the greatest scene in Hamlet, I may have been rash. Planted in the design of the graveyard scene are specific messages for the prince, delivered one after another like tolling bells that summon to his remembrance things past, from his birth to his current embroilments. Like the closet scene, the graveyard scene stamps seals of fated specificity on Hamlet's life. But here the horizons are the largest imaginable. The scene casts the life of the hero, all the lives of all the characters, tragedy itself, in the broadest and most reductive perspective. It completes the ideal-making self-education of the prince, countering the wish that opens his first soliloquy with hard fact: instead of melting, thawing, and resolving into a dew, his flesh, all flesh, will leak into the waters, dusts, and dirts of mother earth. Here as elsewhere, the Shakespearean drama of splitting requires concepts that level and plot devices that reunite, such as the bed-tricks of All's Well That Ends Well and Measure for Measure. The graveyard scene in Hamlet, into which all its characters and motives and themes are funneled, envelops the play in a powerful spirit of counter-splitting. "For this whole world," as Donne observes, "is but an universall church-yard, but our common grave" (Sermons 10:234).

The peculiar structure of the revenge plot, in which a determining crime has taken place before the opening of the play, makes Hamlet itself seem like the conclusion of a tragedy already under way. In another structuring of the plot, closer to what we find in The Murder of Gonzago, Hamlet might be a character who appears in Act 4 of The Hystorie of Claudius to set the catastrophe in motion. He might appear even later in The Tragicall Hystorie of King Hamblet and Queene Gertrude. (Running parallel to Hamlet is a chronicle history, Fortinbras of Norway, in which the prince does not have a line.) Another way to describe this sense of a tragedy caught up in previous tragedies is "being under a curse." Claudius observes that his rank offense "hath the primal eldest curse upon't—/ A brother's murder" (3.3.36-37). Cain is the first murderer, Abel the first corpse. Trying to wean Hamlet of excessive grief, Claudius takes him back to that very body:

To reason most absurd, whose common theme
Is death of fathers, and who still hath cried
From the first corse till he that died today,
"This must be so."

(1.2.103-4)

In the graveyard scene Shakespeare locates his tragedy in the same inclusive framework of "This must be so" that Claudius places grief. Significantly, it is not Abel who puts in an imaginative appearance, but Cain. There is a message for revengers in Hamlet's graveyard.

It is obvious from the first that the gravedigger will make an excellent conversational partner for Hamlet. No one else in the play has been up to it, and the prince has won victory after victory on the battlefields of wit.
The fellow may suffer here and there from the dyslexia Shakespeare habitually imposes on the lower orders, but he likes riddles, speaks ironically, and respects a good foil: "I like thy wit well in good faith" (5.1.45). His conversation moves from the questionable ruling on Ophelia's death to privilege itself:

Gravedigger. And the more pity that great folk should have countenance in this world to drown or hang themselves more than their even-Christen. Come, my spade. There is no ancient gentlemen but gardeners, ditchers, and gravemakers—they hold up Adam's profession. [He digs.]

Other. Was he a gentleman?

Gravedigger. A was the first that ever bore arms.

Other. Why, he had none.

Gravedigger. What, art a heathen? How does thou understand the Scripture? The Scripture says Adam digged. Could he dig without arms? I'll put another question to thee. If thou answerest me not to the purpose, confess thyself—

(27-39)

Like death, the sexton unmakes distinctions. The notion of "even-Christen" ought to abolish the exemptions given to "great folk." Adam bore arms, the sexton bears arms, and uses them as he speaks to dig Ophelia's grave. If Hamlet were around to hear him, he would receive a veiled message about the end of the play, where he will take arms against a sea of troubles in a sword fight. The piece of professional aggrandizement that makes Adam's tilling of the ground into the digging of graves serves as a grinning medieval introduction to Hamlet's forthcoming reflections. For the biblical digging has to do with agriculture, the food we fallen gentlemen labor in order to eat, whereas graves are made for corpses, the food we fallen gentlemen become. The transposition from farmer to grave-maker is of course appropriate inasmuch as Adam, the former gardener, made all our graves. The stage is set in large theological terms for Hamlet to encounter one last time the "rank unweeded garden" of his fallen world.

Arriving on the scene, Hamlet is first taken with the rough irreverence of the sexton. "Has this fellow no feeling of his business a sings in grave-making?" But his is not a dainty job. The language throughout this scene has a sharp concussive physicality: "Cudgel thy brains no more," "How the knave jowls it to th' ground," "chapless, knocked about the mazzard with a sexton's spade," "knock him about the sconce with a dirty shovel." A nineteenth-century edition is eloquent on the second of these examples: "If proof were wanted of the exquisite propriety and force of effect with which Shakespeare uses words, and words of even homely fashion, there could hardly be a more pointed instance than the verb 'jowls' here. What strength it gives to the impression of the head and cheek-bone smiting against the earth! and how it makes the imagination feel the bruise in sympathy!" The speaker of these knockabout homely terms is Hamlet himself. He welcomes the impudent digging into his style.

A long parade of Adam's progeny must have come to this burial ground. To bury one is to displace another. Out of the crowded earth a first skill is thrown up. Again Hamlet observes indignity, the low indifferent to the high:

That skull had a tongue in it, and could sing once. How the knave jowls it to th' ground, as if 'twere Cain's jawbone, that did the first murder. This might be the pate of a fine politician which this ass now o'er-offices, one that would circumvent God, might it not? (74-79)
The rough treatment might be justified if it were the skull of Cain, Claudius's great original. Hamlet will imagine many identities for the skulls in this graveyard, but Cain is the first message he gets: fratricides come to this, their transgressions covered like all transgressions in the general sentence of mortality. The killing of a brother is not the primal eldest curse. What is history but God's curse on human sin? Savoring the way he intends to transform Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's plot against him into a plot against them, Hamlet remarks, "O, 'tis most sweet / When in one line two crafts directly meet" (3.4.211-12). Those who would circumvent God come always to this most sweet end, buried by God's plot in a plot of earth.

With the shift to the "fine politician," Hamlet's initial sense of social indignity yields to pleasure. Being rough with the high and mighty: there's a good game to be found in this, a "fine revolution and we had the trick to see't." One can imagine the skull to be that of a fawning courtier or a pompous lord, anyone deserving a comeuppance in the end. The roughness of the sexton passes into the rough justice of death. Though Hamlet is almost dazed throughout his graveyard lessons, like a child learning for the first time the facts of death, his initial distaste remains: "Did these bones cost no more the breeding but to play at loggets with 'em? Mine ache to think on't" (5.1.90-91). The simultaneous presence of entrancement and revulsion should remind us of his earlier bouts of sex-disgust. As we will see, the substitution of death for sex is one of the underlying tasks of this scene.

"I will speak to this fellow" (115). The man's close provincial wits make a job out of extracting simple information. Hamlet is forced to occupy the role that the Danish court has occupied with respect to him: "How absolute the knave is. We must speak by the card or equivocation will undo us" (133-34). This is like one of Polonius's asides when trying to pump an antic Hamlet. The question "How long hast thou been gravemaker?" throws up another message: "Of all the days i' th' year I came to't that day that our last King Hamlet o'ercame Fortinbras" (139-40). Then another message, this one with Hamlet's name on it: "It was that very day that young Hamlet was born—he that is mad and sent into England" (142-44). A career that began on the day of his father's famous triumph, also the day of his own birth, brings Hamlet into the presence of fate. This man may actually dig his grave; symbolically he has been digging it from the day Hamlet was born. Hamlet asks his death-dealing double about Hamlet,

"How came he mad?" (151). This is the mystery that everyone at court (and perhaps Hamlet himself) has been trying to solve. Like death, the sexton's answer is rough and reductive:

Gravedigger. Very strangely, they say.
Hamlet. How "strangely"?
Gravedigger. Faith, c'en with losing his wits.
Hamlet. Upon what ground?
Gravedigger. Why, here in Denmark.

(151-55)

Everything that has preoccupied Hamlet—the adultery, murder, and incest, the injunctions of the ghost, the suicidal dilemma—is collected in the question "Upon what ground?" The play, the poetry, the great speeches, the thoughts: everything that makes Hamlet Hamlet and Hamlet Hamlet is collected in that question. What ground? "Why, here in Denmark," the sexton answers, that absolute knave. This is, I trust, the comic relief. Normally one thinks of comic relief as a boon to an overtaxed audience, but here the reduction of maddened wits to graveyard ground fore-tells an improvement in the spirits of the tragic hero.

As with the skull whose "fine pate" is "full of fine dirt," Hamlet's thought is turned into ground—Danish ground, the ground upon which he stands, the ground in which all his sufferings and all other sufferings will be buried. He seems to leap at this literalism, for his next question begins a long and strikingly concrete investigation into what happens to corpses in the ground. "How long will a man lie i' th' earth ere he rot?" Forced into repeated reflections on heaven and hell, the afterlife of the soul, he now meditates on the earthy afterlife of the body. Hamlet's nightmind includes a groundmind or gravemind that is kinetic rather than inert.
We do not rest in peace.

The first sign that Hamlet might be interested in the fate of dead bodies appears in the context of conception:

Hamlet. For if the sun breed maggots in a dead dog, being a good kissing carrion—Have you a daughter? Polonius. I have, my lord.

Hamlet. Let her not walk i' th' sun. Conception is a blessing, but as your daughter may conceive—friend, look to't.

(2.2.181-86)

"What a prodigy it is," Montaigne exclaims, "that the drop of seed from which we are produced bears in itself the impressions not only of the bodily form but of the thoughts and inclinations of our fathers! Where does that drop of fluid lodge this infinite number of forms? And how do they convey these resemblances with so heedless and irregular a course that the great-grandson will correspond to his the great-grandfather, the nephew to the uncle?" What was this drop of infinite forms to Claudius's sex-disgusted nephew sun but sunlight (sonlight) infesting carrion with maggots? Yet Hamlet has outgrown those portraits of sullied marital blessings. When he lugs the guts of Polonius out of his mother's door, he pulls putre-faction out of conception. Dissolution, no longer a metaphor, is a thing in itself that behaves like a witty system of metaphors, creating unexpected fusions. In answer to the question of where Polonius is, Hamlet replies that he is "At supper, ... Not where he eats, but where a is eaten" (4.3.17-20), and launches into reflections about how a king, become a worm, become a fish, might wind up in the guts of a beggar. Once obsessed with the facts of life, he is now fixated on the facts of death.

The graveyard scene begins with the posing of riddles. Who builds strongest? The gravemaker, since his houses last to doomsday (despite evictions!). The riddle points to death, certainly an abiding source of riddles. Is there life after death? What sort of life? The ghost of King Hamlet, leaving our riddles intact, is forbidden "to tell the secrets of my prison-house" (1.5.14). Contemplating the riddles of conception and birth, whose unfolding Freud thought inseparable from the achievement of a mature psyche, has brought Hamlet no enlightenment whatsoever, just rage, misogyny, and disillusionment; but this scene effects his return to "something after death" (3.1.78), the riddles at the other end of life. As he did not in his meditations on conception and birth, Hamlet will find room for wisdom in his encounter with death—a truth he can live with, even embrace.

As he works, the gravedigger sings three stanzas of Lord Vaux's "The aged lover renounceth love," a poem in which the speaker bids farewell to the "lusty life" of youth and prepares himself for the grave:

A pickaxe and a spade, a spade,
For and a shrouding-sheet;
Oh a pit of clay for to be made
For such a guest is meet.

(92-95)

Gascoigne notes that the poem "was thought by some to be made upon his death-bed" (Furness, 1:380). The singing gravedigger makes the "pit of clay" requested by the man in the song. More than he yet knows, Hamlet is that man. For the last message embedded in this fateful scene reveals the identity of the woman this grave will hold:

Hamlet. What, the fair Ophelia!
Gertrude. Sweets to the sweet. Farewell.
It is the grave of Hamlet's irresolute youth, the marriage never to be. Like the speaker of Vaux's poem, Hamlet moves from first things to last things without the mature flowerings first things normally promise.

As once he stared at female faces, so now he stares at skulls. What does he learn? The book and volume of a brain, once the seat of memory in the back, reason in the middle, commonsense and imagination in the front, becomes in the end a wad of ground or a hollow stench—truly a dirty mind. This is not the "easeful death" Keats was sometimes half in love with; Hamlet is falling in love with death as insult. One element of the scene's lesson is simple and nonsectarian, as old as the hills. Death, playing no favorites, delivers the supreme rebuke to human pride. "You know, what busie path so ere you tread / To greatnesse, you must sleep among the dead." No matter how great one is, how powerful, how ambitious, he will lie down in darkness and have his light in ashes. High and low, man and woman, prince and pauper, jester and king: death undoes all the terms that divide and separate human beings by reducing difference to indistinction.

There is a second part to the lesson. It has to do with literal dissolution, death's attack on the integrity of the body. Donne writes of "death after death," imitating his subject in expansive renamings: "But for us that dye now and sleepe in the state of the dead, we must al passe this posthume death, this death, after death, nay this death after burrial, this dissolution after dissolution, this death of corruption and putrification, of vermiculation and incineration, of dissolution and dispersion in and from the grave" (Sermons 10:238). The moral specific to this death after death begins to take root in the vividness of Hamlet's descriptions of the gravedigger. It is closer to consciousness in his identification of the skulls with vain and pompous men now given to "Lady Worm" (87). It almost surfaces in his address to Yorick's skull.

We have come at last to Yorick, the best-known skull in the graveyard, who for some reason has occasioned more sentimentality in the history of Hamlet criticism than any other figure in the play. He was a fine fellow, and full of infinite jest. But the critics dwell intolerably on his fineness. "Repulsed by death, Hamlet remembers Yorick as someone once wonderfully alive, his tongue the instrument of jests, his throat the instrument of song, his wit the stimulus of other men's laughter. Life is valuable in itself. It is better to be, or to have been, if like Yorick one can be fully human, not earth-contaminated like the politician, the courtier, and the lawyer." To which I say, pah! Is he so fine as to revise "To be or not to be" and banish from the end of the play Hamlet's low estimate of the world? In psychoanalytic criticism Yorick is the good father, unearthed at last to provide an alternative to the legendary father and the contemptible stepfather:

Here I want to add a third aspect of the father that is most subtly introduced. I believe that Yorick is a thinly disguised father image. He is the tenderly loving, affectionate father, with "those lips that I have kissed I know not how oft," who "hath borne me on his back a thousand times." He is the only person in the entire play of whom Hamlet speaks with unreserved tenderness. He died when Hamlet was seven—which suggests when the repression of that relationship occurred. It had indeed been a fateful relationship: Hamlet had thereafter become a great jester, too. The identification with Yorick seems to have been quite strong. Hamlet's feminine passive relationship to his father is of course the most dangerous of all, and he remembers it only in connection with a substitute figure and within the context of death.

The author is a psychoanalyst, not a literary critic, and I do not begrudge him his crude biographical imagining any more than I would Bradley's. That Hamlet remembers Yorick as a performer, a successful
jester who kept the table roaring, suggests some form of identification. No doubt this "whoreson mad fellow" (170) contributed some stylistic flourishes to Hamlet's antic disposition. Shakespeare was interested in fools at this point in his career—Touch-stone in As You Like It (such a fascination to Jaques), Feste in Twelfth Night, Parolles at the end of All's Well. None of these are jesters to a king; a resurrected Yorick will one day be given a plum role in King Lear. His services are not required in Hamlet because the prince in his variety is himself a fool, using the fool's techniques of riddle, literalism, and apparent lunacy to draw the court into booby-trapped mazes of infinite antic jest. But just now in Hamlet the main business is neither a salute to foolery nor a last minute revelation of a good alternative father.

Passages like the two I have quoted are found throughout the field. Almost everyone cuddles up to Yorick. Maybe the critics sense that Hamlet is creating an ideal, and therefore sponsor his efforts with exaggerations of their own, beholding "unreserved tenderness" and a "feminine passive" demeanor. The text itself is wilder and more interesting. Hamlet is in fact discovering an ideal, but the ideal is not Yorick:

_Hamlet._ Alas, poor Yorick. I knew him, Horatio, a fellow of infinite jest, of most excellent fancy. He hath borne me on his back a thousand times, and now—how abhorred in my imagination it is. My gorge rises at it. Here hung those lips that I have kissed I know not how oft. Where be your gibes now, your gambols, your songs, your flashes of merriment, that were wont to set the table on a roar? not one now to mock your own grinning? Quite chop-fallen? Now get you to my lady's chamber and tell her, let her paint an inch thick, to this favour she must come. Make her laugh at that—Prithee, Horatio, tell me one thing.

_Horatio._ What's that, my lord?

_Hamlet._ Dost thou think Alexander looked o' this fashion i' th' earth?

_Horatio._ E'en so.

_Hamlet._ And smelt so? Pah! [Puts down the skull.]

(178-94)

The imagination of Yorick alive becomes "now," in the presence of Yorick's skull, an abhorrence. That is why Hamlet stresses the affectionate character of his memory of the jester: he is alive to the contrast, his disgust as sharp as his memories are tender. At the thought that he has kissed the lips without any apprehension of the skull beneath, his "gorge rises."

Unwilling to remain a captive to revulsion, a violent Hamlet has labored to make ideals out of sex-disgust. The new death-disgust also passes into aggression. Death has taunted and humiliated Yorick, and Hamlet takes the part of death, staging a triumph of mockery. "Not one now to mock your own grinning?" The last joke is on the jester. Yorick, victim of death's zingers, has no more comic inventions. Hamlet gloats over his melancholy silence. "Quite chop-fallen?" He discovers a satisfying use for the black humor of death: "get you to my lady's chamber." As painting to the face, so the face to the skull. In grave graves hypocrisy gets stripped away, leaving a skeletal core that smiles and smiles and still seems disgusting. Death after death, not Yorick, is the ideal being born in Hamlet's teeming brain.

Clearly struck by a thought, he wonders if Alexander, conqueror of the world, came to this end. Of course he did: death is not a splitter. But I think the submerged idea in the transition from Yorick to Alexander is that death, the death he has just verbally imitated, rough taunting death, is one hell of a revenger:
Hamlet. To what base uses we may return, Horatio! Why, may not imagination trace the noble dust of Alexander till a find it stopping a bunghole?

Horatio. Twere to consider too curiously to consider so.

Hamlet. No, faith, not a jot, but to follow him thither with modesty enough, and likelihood to lead it. Alexander died, Alexander was buried, Alexander returneth to dust, the dust is earth, of earth we make loam, and why of that loam whereto he was converted might they not stop a beer-barrel?

Imperious Caesar, dead and turn'd to clay,
Might stop a hole to keep the wind away.
O that that earth which kept the world in awe
Should patch a wall t' expel the winter's flaw.
But soft, but soft awhile. Here comes the King,
The Queen, the courtiers.

(196-211)

The tame Horatio uncharacteristically pulls back from the suggestion, perhaps because he senses the passionate aggression in Hamlet's death-tracing imagination. Again, this is not Romantic death, a pantheistic reunion with nature, the voluptuous death of Walt Whitman's endlessly rocking cradle. According to Donne, death after death "is the most inglorious and contemptible vilification, the most deadly and peremptory nullification of man, that wee can consider" (Sermons 10:239). No ordinary considerer, Hamlet warms to the most nullifying of all man's thoughts of man, and insists on exploring the bunghole hypothesis through every stage of the transformation. If a demonstration of the possibility of Alexander stopping a bung-hole were the only thing at issue, the expansion of the idea to Caesar would be superfluous. Hamlet not only takes up the case of imperious Caesar, but also shifts to verse, clearly proud of his thought.

Hamlet has been flummoxed throughout his musings on revenge in part because he holds himself to a Senecan standard. He must drink hot blood, entertain bloody thoughts only. His sword must deliver a horrible hent, sending Claudius headlong to hell. Revenge is after all an art. The genre demands an escalation of horror, the vengeance exceeding the crime: scelera non ulcisceris, nisi uincis, you do not avenge a crime unless you surpass it. What Hamlet learns from tracing the corpses of the great empire-builders of the ancient world is that death always takes care of that excess. There is outrage enough in death for the case of Cain himself. He has imagined several "base uses" to which we may return; surely there are thousands more. Nature, inspired by God's curse, stops at nothing. A piece of Shakespeare might be lodged in the paper on which this book is printed, or in the stuffing of the chair on which I sit. Stopping a bunghole or filling a crack in the wall: these are every bit as good as what Mortimer had done to Edward II, or Richard to his brother Clarence. The lessons of the graveyard scene relieve the pressures on Hamlet. Mothers at the beginning of life do not sully the flesh as profoundly as God at the end of life. Hamlet will avenge his father but need not plan a bella vendetta or a rivalrous Senecan atrocity. The God's task were, to converts, Christianity. God's curse will handle the really tough stuff.

This is the great trick at the end of the play. Because Hamlet does not plan his revenge, he seems to have sacrificed some portion of his will. Conventional revengers are ambitious. They want to appall the gods, horrify the heavens. They want to be remembered for their artful horrors, achieving preeminence in the memorials of pay-back. The inner danger of the genre has always been that its heroes can become vindictive villains. As if to confirm that judgment, Kyd's Hieronomo bites out his tongue and commits suicide after achieving his revenge. Others take care to Christianize their tasks; Hamlet is not alone among patient revengers. The genre demands of the revenger some tradeoff between morality and self-respect. But it is the distinction of Hamlet, in the lesson that seizes the hero's mind when contemplating poor Yorick, to show that
the moral path, abjuring Senecan plans and ends, can also satisfy the aggressions of the revenger. Christianity is made to seem fully compatible with Hamlet's vengeful spirit.

The trick does not work for everyone.\textsuperscript{18} The history of \textit{Hamlet} criticism shows the stubborn persistence of the linked ideas that revenge is evil and the ghost a demon. But the graveyard identification with death confuses the polarities of honorable vengeance and Christian morality. Death is our appointed end. To death we must finally submit. The devotional literature of the Renaissance is full of meditations on skulls or the indignities of the grave meant to detach the self from worldly ties.\textsuperscript{19} Finding an accomplice in death, Hamlet has chosen the route of relative piety for a life co-opted by this genre. Whatever he imagines to be in store for Claudius is equally in store for him: there is no splitting in death after death, and the revenger will get the same rough treatment as his victim. Still, by locating his vengeful passion in death's devastating severity Hamlet has given the curse of mortality a keen classical edge.

He wins for himself the calm of 5.2. It is not quite the mysterious indifference envisioned by Harold Bloom. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern "are not near my conscience," but Laertes is: "I am very sorry, good Horatio, / That to laertes I forgot myself (75-76). He apologizes at length, if somewhat vaguely, before the fencing match. He takes care to assess one final time the fit between his conscience and his task:

\begin{verbatim}
is't not perfect conscience  
    To quit him with this arm? And is't not to be  
    damn'd  
    To let this canker of our nature come  
    In further evil?  

(5.2.67-70)
\end{verbatim}

Perfect conscience to do it, damnation not to do it. He is not indifferent to damnation. He seems rather to have lost his fear of it.

In this final scene Hamlet is no longer a seeker and maker of ideals, but himself an ideal—a noble spirit fashioned by himself with very little help from his world or his genre. He has resigned himself to his presence in a hackneyed if still popular genre. Finally. Problems have become strengths. Suicide and virginity combine in the readiness to be rash, leaving the ends to God. The anger has been detached from womanhood and turned solely toward Claudius. Taught that mortality will serve its interests, anger bides its time. An alliance with death has given melancholy, his old distraction, a new purpose. It won't be long now. Soon the news will arrive from England: "The interim is mine" (73).

After Osric departs, he is struck by a premonition concerning the match. But Hamlet is now beyond the timidities of prudent forethought. He need simply wait, holding the "something dangerous" (5.1.255) in him at the ready:

\begin{verbatim}

Horatio. You will lose, my lord.  

Hamlet. I do not think so. Since he went into France, I have been in continual practice. I shall win at the odds. Thou wouldst not think how ill all's here about my heart; but it is no matter.  

Horatio. Nay, good my lord.  

Hamlet. It is but foolery, but it is such a kind of gaingiving as would perhaps trouble a woman.
\end{verbatim}
**Horatio.** If your mind dislike anything, obey it. I will forestall their repair hither and say you are not fit.

**Hamlet.** Not a whit. We defy augury. There is 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, of aught he leaves, knows aught, what is't to leave betimes? Let be.

(5.2.205-20)

And the court, cushions, foils and daggers come forth, followed by the wine. The continual practice will be a help; heaven was ordinant in that. But even now, after the long journey from "A little more than kin, and less than kind" to "I shall win at the odds," there is still a reason not to act, a crossroads to ponder.

To go or not to go, that is the question. Is the illness in his heart something to trouble over or something to defy? The moment can certainly be second-guessed, since his intuition correctly warns of danger. A thorough meditation might even consider that fact. "What if I ignore the premonition, go to the match, then later am sorry? In vain the will seeks alteration in the finished records of memory. O condition of the mind … " Finding one last use for the remnants of his misogyny, Hamlet dismisses as womanish the premonition and its demand to be unpacked in words by thinking over the problem of going or not going. He must rededicate himself to rashness. Horatio bathes him in a mother's concern. "If your mind dislike anything, obey it." He will tell the court Hamlet is not fit. "Not a whit," Hamlet replies, the crack of the rhyme slapping the idea's face.

"We defy augury." This evokes the egotistical sublime of Seneca, but has its true magnificence in being smaller and less desperate. Is the "we" royal? Does it denote the team of Hamlet and Horatio (and maybe Gertrude)? "We" might even include God: "There is special providence in the fall of a sparrow." Birds figured prominently in Roman augury, and Hamlet's reference to the gospel sparrow seems designed to call attention to the pointlessness of augury in a Christian dispensation, where fate has become providence. The biblical context speaks to the folly of fearing those who may take your life: "and feare ye not them which kil the bodie, but are not able to kil the soule: but rather feare him, which is able to destroy soule and bodie in hel. Are not two sparrows sold for a farthing, and one of them shall not fall on the ground without your Father? Yea, and all the heeres of your heade are nombred. Feare ye not therefore, ye are of more value than manie sparrows" (Matt. 10.28-31 Geneva). Only God should be feared, and that fear tempered by our knowledge of his love.

Augury tried to see ahead. Providence, God's business, means seeing ahead. Calvin, splitting providence, believed that his overseeing is not merely "general," the result of regularities set in motion at the creation of the world, but also "special," "whence it follows that providence is lodged in the act." Special providence impresses itself on the situation, the moment, the particular sparrow. Every hair on one's head is numbered: we could not be told in plainer terms that God is an individualist. The prince of individualism is not as plotless as he may appear. At the end of the closet scene he declared himself an artful counter-plotter, able to turn the ploys of Claudius to his own ends. He will do just that in the forthcoming fencing match. But through the concept of "special providence," a rare instance of Shakespeare's appeal to a specific and sectarian theological idea, Hamlet aligns his countering will with the supreme author of history's plot—which is to say, the plot of death, the counterplot to human crime. Into the hands of the divine craftmaster our plans are delivered, there to be shaped and fitted. The belief in special or singular providence, maintained Calvin (a careful student of Seneca), rids the mind of disquiet: "Gratitude of mind for the favorable outcome of things, patience in adversity, and also incredible freedom from worry about the future all necessarily follow upon this knowledge" (209). Shedding baggage, Hamlet leaves to God the task of looking out for himself.
He then utters three perfectly fateful sentences. Whatever "it" means, "it" must happen either now or in the future. The statements are a trap for necessity, capturing fate. It is impossible that "it" be not now and be not to come. The very model for something that is sure to be either now or to come, that has to be one or the other, is death. But most readers and audiences take "it" to mean the occasion to kill Claudius as well. Claudius's chance at him, his chance at Claudius: these are the same thing now. The mighty opposites are trapped in the same grave-yard sentences. We have in the double "it" (my death, his death) one last assertion of the doubling of the two characters. Moreover, Christianity comes into alliance with the revenge motive. Working in accord with rash action, providence in Act 5 absorbs death (it will come) and revenge (it will come). Hamlet assumes that he has earned the special providence, uniquely his own, of not dying without the opportunity for vengeance. His individuality, the main subject of his students from the Romantics on, has resolved the split in the genre between morality and satisfaction.

Remembering "To be or not to be," critics discern maturation in "Let be." Hamlet is now beyond the dilemma of wishing to escape his fate. Rather than trying to outthink God, he works with God, his fellow counterplotter. Insofar as he is still suicidal, heedlessly defying augury, the impulse to self-destruction has made a home for itself within the imperative to revenge. Jenkins will have none of this: "Many editors wrongly take this ['Let be'] to be part of Hamlet's reflections, expressing his resignation to the course of events. A misplaced ingenuity has even tried to make it answer 'To be or not to be.' But it merely recognizes an interruption which requires their dialogue to break off (407). He is surely right that the immediate sense of "Let be" is "No more time for this" rather than "Let the question of when death will come cease to distract us, since the readiness is all," though I do not see why these two senses are necessarily disjunctive. I also grant that it would take an unrealistically attentive audience to hear in "Let be" an echo of the famous soliloquy, though it counts toward the meaningfulness of "Let be" that Hamlet echoes the phrase ("O, I could tell you—/ But let it be" [5.2.342-43]) after receiving his death. Yet the evidence of the Sonnets proves that Shakespeare was capable of writing in a manner that wastes no opportunity for sense, and the smallest details of his plays, rigorously interpreted by generations of critics, keep falling into happy patterns. Hamlet says "Let be" as the court materializes—his special providence, it. There is no more time to talk out his justification for going to the fencing match. The event is at hand; he is ready; let thoughts be. Hamlet's consignment of a thoughtful moment to oblivion with "Let be" does seem in its way an answer to "To be or not to be." He is no longer stymied by the conflicts of internal argument. The pale cast of thought recovers the native hue of resolution.

We may now pause to consider the divinity that preoccupies our hero in the final act. Many have found it a barren and etiolated Christianity, hardly distinguishable from the stoic love of fate. They are surely right that it lacks the fullness and cultural ambition of the Christianity one associates with Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, and Calvin, though as we have seen it borrows from Calvin a special notion of providence. Hamlet's narrowed faith has no concept of the soul, no set of virtues and vices, no answer to the general problems of mankind, no liturgy, no commandments, and no Christ. I would argue mat if the Hamlet of Act 5 did profess an expansive Christianity, we would find ourselves either out of revenge tragedy altogether, with a hero who turns against his appointed task and rejects his father's ghost, or stuck in a morally repellent revenge tragedy, with a hero whose continued dedication to vengeance would render his religiosity pointless. Hamlet's shaping and ordaining God is the theological construct of a specific man in a specific circumstance—a revenger in a revenge tragedy who must pursue "howsomever" (1.5.84) the death of Claudius, taint not his mind, leave his mother to heaven, and "remember" his father's ghost. His divinity can only be understood in the context of his individuality.

God cleans out and empties Hamlet's wild mind. "The time is out of joint," the prince declared after swearing Horatio and Marcellus to secrecy: "O cursed spite, / That ever I was born to set it right" (1.5.196-97). But God must shape rough ends, fitting together what is "out of joint." Hamlet need not produce a horrid vengeance to balance off his father's murder. He is not so much "born" to set it right—and here one must recall yet again the ugly thoughts that swirl about birth—as he must die to set it right. By identifying with death as pure annihilation, Hamlet escapes from his family-confined thoughts of birth and incest to claim a place in the
entire history of mankind, whose microcosm is the crowded graveyard of 5.1. This is not all of death, as Horatio will remind us at the exact moment of Hamlet's passing. But death as loss and dissolution, consignment to the impersonal energies of matter, is exactly the aspect of death a revenger is capable of divinizing—a curse of utter humiliation. Such death is the core of tragedy, and in this respect Hamlet makes his very own the darkness of his genre.

To this death he adds "special providence," which I interpret to mean a death uniquely his, and one that will not preclude the killing of Claudius. When the ghost appears a second time, he in effect asks Hamlet to see his mother differently, as a suffering creature in need of wise counsel rather than a contaminating enemy to be stabbed with words. This act of moral imagination marks a shift from birth, anger, self-sickening thought, and Senecan plotting to death, calm, rash action, and special providence. After pointing in this direction, toward the future, King Hamlet recedes into the night, clearing room for God. The old command to avenge Claudius then rewrites itself in the language of divinity: what was initially Hamlet's promise to obey the ghost and kill Claudius becomes God's promise that Hamlet will indeed obey the ghost and kill Claudius. While I see the ghost's remains in the God of the final act, I am reluctant to call this God a refiguration of the father, the mother, or the still earlier "combined parent concept" that Ernest Jones detected in the play. My psychoanalytic instincts tell me that the human mind conserves and refashions, stringing out origins in complex ends; yet my instincts as a student of Hamlet tell me that it would be wrong, completely wrong, to pull the hero back into the confinement of his beginnings. All of the ghost's commands will be obeyed, save the last. In Act 5 the ghost is gone and unremembered. King Hamlet and Queen Gertrude, insofar as they represent the fountainheads of his mental distress, are forgotten in God. In his detailed probing of "death after death" Hamlet learns both the universal sovereignty of his aggression and the secret of peacefulness. His peacefulness is that of someone given a terrible peremptory task, so peremptory that "I do not know / Why yet I live to say this thing's to do" (4.4.43-44), who gradually realizes that his task is nothing less than the everyday business of the gravedigging God of this world. Sooner or later, it will come.

If ever a scene illustrated that a divinity shapes our ends, rough-hew them as we may, it is the end of Hamlet. Claudius was right in supposing that a blasé Hamlet would not bother to peruse the foils (4.7.132-35). The three traps laid for the hero—unbuttoned sword, envenomed sword, the cup of poisoned wine—are nonetheless turned around against their makers, though not until Hamlet's death is already in him. First the tip of the blade and its poison: "The point envenom'd too! Then, venom, to thy work." But one must be sure at a time like this. And it is not vengeance enough to puncture Claudius at sword's length. Hamlet wants to get into his face. Cup in hand, he moves to the kill:

    Here, thou incestuous, murd'rous, damned Dane,
    Drink off this potion. Is thy union here?
    Follow my mother.

(5.2.230-32)

The drunken king whose loud carouses Hamlet excoriated on the way to meet the ghost, the poisoner who smiles and smiles and can still be a villain: death at the smile, death in a drink, death in the metaphor of revelry, death through the jawbones, is fitted to both his crime and his concealment of it. Bradley heard the venom and wit in "union." Hamlet kills the marriage in ironically affirming the marriage. If "union" means "marriage" as well as "pearl," it must also allude to the sexual union marriage celebrates. "Follow my mother": go to my mother's bed, uncle. As we follow this poisonous jest's lines of filiation back through the play, leading us to the sources of Hamlet's anguish, we realize that this is exactly what he would say, and must say. He has held in readiness for this climactic occasion his old ambivalent hatred for the sexual bond between Gertrude and Claudius. His special providence is to have won from grief, doubt, and disillusionment this moment of consummate contempt.
He holds on to the cup. Horatio tries to seize it from him, but Hamlet wrests it from his grasp: "As th'art a man, / Give me the cup. Let go, by Heaven I'll ha't." Only Gertrude and Claudius are to drink from the cup. It is their union. Horatio must "Let go": again the imperative of action descended from "Get thee to a nunnery" and "To a nunnery, go." The impulse throughout has been to save someone. He could not rescue Ophelia from the wounds he inflicted on her life. He could not rescue Gertrude from the fate of Claudius. His apology was too little and too late to help Laertes. But he does save Horatio, supplying the only reason that could possibly dissuade his friend from following him. Horatio must do him the favor of ministering to his "wounded name." If no one knows aught of aught they leave, what is it to leave betimes? Such indifference is ultimately too severe. He cannot leave a vilified name, for this revenger has fought with outstanding courage to make ideals and become an ideal. When the story is told, full of unnatural acts and purposes mistook, he will not be remembered for his revenge, though it is memorable enough and fulfills the genre's expectations. But he has not competed in horrors.

The sergeant of the gravemind, home to everything but the soul, arrests thought. "Good night, sweet prince": Hamlet splits in half, a body no longer alive, a soul we can no longer know; base remains for the long benighted "feast" (5.2.370) of death, sweet untainted spirit (so we hope) for the everlasting day of eternal rest. The kingdom is passed on. Arrangements are made. Like Gertrude at the grave of Ophelia, Fortinbras remembers the promise that is not to be: "For he was likely, had he been put on, / To have prov'd most royal." Guns discharge their sound and fury, signifying "the soldier's music and the rite of war"—signifying nothing with respect to Hamlet, whose honor was of a different order. We have been privy to his inner counsels and deepest plots, the intimate revelations of his seven soul-baring soliloquies. We know one thing he never knows—the hindsight that Claudius might have been killed and damned as he knelt in the chapel. In cases where we have been allowed to see ahead (that Polonius is concealed behind the arras, that the trip to England is a death plot, that the grave being dug is for Ophelia, that the fencing match is a death plot), Hamlet has eventually caught up with us, purging dramatic irony from our spectatorship. The audience's sense of the meaning of the play has been the meaning he gave it. But now we are alone, and to avert the collapse of meaning our minds reach toward him. Hamlet at last becomes what he fought to escape: thoughts. As the guns reverberate we probably remember in a confused way his words and deeds, our long fascination with the role now ended. It is not a minor task of Hamlet criticism to give shape to those inchoate recollections.

I cannot say good night to him without remembering the moment at which the command of vengeance was first a mental fact:

    Hold, hold, my heart,
    And you, my sinews, grow not instant old,
    But bear me stiffly up. Remember thee?
    Ay, poor ghost, whiles memory holds a seat
    In this distracted globe. Remember thee?
    Yea, from the table of my memory
    I'll wipe away all trivial fond records,
    All saws of books, all forms, all pressures past
    That youth and observation copied there,
    And thy commandment all alone shall live
    Within the book and volume of my brain,
    Unmix'd with baser matter. Yes, by heaven!
    O most pernicious woman!
    O villain, villain, smiling damned villain!
    (1.5.93-106)

Had Hamlet been able to limit himself to one untrammeled thought, "Thou shalt avenge," we would pair him with Titus Andronicus, who writes vows of vengeance in his study and rises to greet Tamora in the guise of
Revenge (Tit 5.2). But Hamlet's first vision of his perfection is not to be his last. Already the baser matter of mater intrudes in "most pernicious woman," trailing with her the forms and pressures of youth. Vengeance must share this mind with clamoring disillusionment: such is the tragic hand dealt to the forger of modern consciousness. Maturity of the ordinary sort is out of the question—no degree from Wittenberg, no marriage, no reign, no memorable military exploit. He can excel only in the way he leaves his mother to heaven, takes vengeance on Claudius, and arrives at his own death with an unsullied mind. It is evident from the beginning that if Hamlet is to succeed as a revenger, he must succeed as a thinker of contaminated thoughts, finding strategies of cooperation for a divided consciousness. Baser matter, as it turns out, whether in thoughts or in bodies, mixes with everything. His horror of mixture, of splits collapsed, must come to terms with—must seek its peace in—the great grim mixture of death. He does exactly that, and from a spoiled heritage generates his extraordinary composure of soul in the final act.

How different his last idea of revenge is from his first! What a false ideal this seems from the perspective of the end! The first paternal visit is disastrous; the second shows the way to the poise of Act 5. Virtually everything in Hamlet, down to the finest details of writing and plotting, is divided and yet paired. Granted, the impression of transformation in the last act rests on two speeches only, the praise of rashness and the defiance of augury. Yet these speeches have behind them the theological sweep and psychological authority of the graveyard scene: there we touch the base matter at the ground of his providential felicity.

We remember Hamlet for the effects of vengeance on his mind (Acts 1-4) and at last for his mind's effects on vengeance (Act 5). No Shakespearean character comes a longer way. Because he rewrote the book on revenge within the volume of his brain, he has been distracting our globes for two centuries.

Notes

1 Kerri Thomsen has suggested to me that Hamlet's allusion to his father's "sepulchre" having opened "ponderous and marble jaws" (1.4.48, 50) implies burial in a crypt, perhaps in Elsinore's chapel. But calling the ghost a "mole" working in the "earth" (1.5.170) suggests burial in the graveyard.

2 Furness, Hamlet, 1:383. The edition is that of Charles and Mary Cowden Clarke.


5 Montaigne, "Of the resemblance of children to fathers," in Complete Essays, p. 578.


7 The full text of the poem is given in Furness Hamlet, 1:381.


9 There are of course many great Renaissance poems inspired by this ancient theme. See especially George Herbert's "Church Monuments" in The Works of George Herbert, ed. F. E. Hutchinson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1941), p. 64.


Cf. *Measure for Measure* 3.1.19-21: "Thou art not thy-self / For thou exists on many a thousand grains / That issue out of dust."


Look for him under your boot soles. It almost goes without saying that Hamlet's reflections bear no hint of Whitman's pantheistic atomism, where dissolution into the grass licenses expansive democratic egotism. There may be just a touch of early modern ecological harmony; a bunghole needs stopping, after all, and something must do the job. But the dominant note is greatness rebuked, egotism's comeuppance. These are "base uses."

Rom. 12.19: "Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves, but rather give place unto wrath: for it is written, Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord."

Braden, *Renaissance Tragedy and the Senecan Tradition*, p. 203. I am indebted throughout the second half of this chapter to Braden's richly suggestive discussion of the genre and Hamlet's place in it.

Paul Cantor, for example, thinks "the tragic conflict between the classical and Christian elements in Hamlet" is ultimately incapable of resolution (*Hamlet*, p. 63). Yet what we call Christianity is itself in some measure an accommodation with classical culture. Earlier, Cantor notes in the play a "new emphasis on the mysterious depths of human interiority that goes hand in hand with the Christian concern for the salvation of souls" (p.45). It seems to me that Hamlet does achieve, in the new interiority of Act 5, a vision of his situation in the world that is both Christian and vengeful.


23 Frye, *The Renaissance Hamlet*, p. 268, aptly quotes *Macbeth* 1.7.10-11: "This even handed justice / Commends th' ingredience of our poisoned chalice / To our own lips."


25 "Father and mother is man and wife, man and wife is one flesh" (4.4.54-55).


Teaching Guide

Teaching Guide: Introduction

So you’re going to teach William Shakespeare’s *The Tragedy of Hamlet*. Whether it’s your first or hundredth time, *Hamlet* has been a mainstay of English classrooms for generations. While it has its challenges—complex language, myriad themes, suicide and death—teaching this text to your class will be rewarding for you and your students. Studying *Hamlet* will give them unique insight into humanism as a literary movement and the English Renaissance as a literary period, as well as important themes surrounding mortality, revenge, and the subjective nature of human experience. This guide highlights some of the most salient aspects to keep in mind before you begin teaching.

Note: This content is available to Teacher Subscribers in a convenient, formatted pdf.

Facts at a Glance

- **Publication Date:** 1603
- **Recommended Grade Levels:** 11th, 12th, undergrad
- **Approximate Word Count:** 30,600
- **Author:** William Shakespeare
- **Country of Origin:** England
- **Genre:** Play (Tragedy)
- **Literary Period:** English Renaissance, Elizabethan
- **Conflict:** Person vs. Person, Person vs. Supernatural, Person vs. Self
- **Setting:** Elsinore, Denmark, 14th or 15th century CE
- **Structure:** Five-Act Stage Drama
- **Mood:** Dark, Contemplative, Anxious

Texts That Go Well With *Hamlet*

*Beowulf* is an Old English epic detailing the heroic exploits of Beowulf, a Geatish hero. Beowulf’s story deals with familiar themes, such as honor and what it means to be heroic. It takes a very different approach from *Hamlet*, which can be attributed to the different cultural contexts in which the two pieces were composed. Whereas Hamlet is a deeply introspective character, tempered by his own doubts, Beowulf is all steely exterior, a man of action and a seeker of glory.

“Gertrude Talks Back” is a 1993 short story by Margaret Atwood that reimagines the “closet scene” from act 3, scene 4, from Gertrude’s perspective. As Gertrude responds to her son’s accusations, she asserts her independence, laying out her own reasons for remarrying. She also states that it was not Claudius who killed King Hamlet, but her. “Gertrude Talks Back” imbues Gertrude with a narrative voice and agency that she lacks in *Hamlet*, offering a modern, feminist re-envisioning of the character.

*Great Expectations* is an 1861 novel by Charles Dickens that follows the life of Pip, an orphaned boy living with his abusive sister and her kind husband. Throughout his life, Pip struggles through feelings of guilt, inadequacy, and a desire to find a place in the world. Pip’s inner sense of morality is placed at odds with his desire for advancement in the world, echoing Hamlet’s agonized deliberations over whether or not he should kill Claudius.
“The Lady of Shalott” is an 1842 poem by Alfred, Lord Tennyson that tells the story of a woman locked in a tower who is forbidden from looking out at nearby Camelot lest a curse befall her. One day, Sir Lancelot rides by her tower and the lady makes the fateful decision to look out at him, triggering the curse. She dies while floating down the river in a boat, a strikingly similar image to Ophelia’s death by drowning. The Lady of Shalott’s isolated tower also mirrors Ophelia’s cloistered life, blindly obedient as she is to her family’s wishes.

“The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” is a 1915 poem by T. S. Elliot that explores ideas of social isolation, disillusionment, and mortality through the stream-of-conscious musings of the aging J. Alfred Prufrock. Though Prufrock claims he was never “meant to be” like Prince Hamlet, his introspective struggle to ask the “overwhelming question” recalls Hamlet’s existential soliloquizing. Prufrock is steeped in Elliot’s disillusionment with the superficiality of modernity, offering a contrast to the philosophical depths plumbed in Shakespeare’s age.

*Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* is a 1966 absurdist play by Tom Stoppard that retells the story of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* from the perspective of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. It builds on several themes from *Hamlet* by reinforcing the figure of life as a performance and emphasizing the difficulty of differentiating between reality and illusion. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern struggle to understand their surroundings, ultimately resigning themselves to their inevitable deaths.

*The Spanish Tragedy* is a 16th-century play by Thomas Kyd that is often credited with popularizing the revenge tragedy genre. It follows the story of Hieronimo, who hopes to avenge the murder of his son, Horatio. It shares many structural elements with *Hamlet*, including a play within a play and a ghost in search of revenge. They are also thematically similar, focusing on ideas of revenge, justice, and family.

**Teaching Guide: Key Plot Points**

While we recommend reading Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* in its entirety, we understand that your classroom may have time constraints. The following Key Plot Points are meant to guide you and your students to the most relevant parts of the text so you can plan your lessons most efficiently.

**Hamlet Converses With the Ghost (Act 1, Scene 5):** Hamlet agrees to hear what the ghost has to say, and it declares itself the ghost of Hamlet’s father, King Hamlet. It goes on to say that King Hamlet’s death was not an accident, but a murder perpetrated by Claudius. Hamlet, already disgusted by Claudius’s hasty marriage to Gertrude, is quick to condemn both his mother and his uncle. However, the ghost advises Hamlet to leave Gertrude’s judgment to heaven and to only pursue revenge against Claudius. This scene provides the inciting action for the play, furnishing Hamlet with the necessary motivation to pursue his revenge plot. However, doubts over the ghost’s identity and trustworthiness hinder him.

**Hamlet Sets a Trap for Claudius (Act 2, Scene 2 and Act 3, Scene 2):** Hamlet’s former friends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, who are now spying for Claudius, arrive in Elsinore alongside a traveling theater group. In order to verify Claudius’s guilt, Hamlet decides to stage a play containing a scene modeled after the ghost’s description of its murder. Hamlet hopes that Claudius will be affected by the scene, thereby confirming his involvement in King Hamlet’s death. In order to deter suspicion, Hamlet also begins acting mad. The only person with whom he discusses his plot is Horatio, cementing Hamlet’s isolation within Elsinore.

**Hamlet Confronts Gertrude and Kill Polonius (Act 3, Scene 4):** After the play-within-the-play, Gertrude calls Hamlet to her closet and confronts him about his mistreatment of Claudius. Hamlet responds by rebuking her for her hasty and incestuous remarriage. Hamlet’s intensity frightens Gertrude and as she calls out for help, Polonius, who had been spying on the conversation, reveals himself. Hamlet assumes the concealed
figure is Claudius and stabs Polonius, killing him. In the aftermath, Hamlet continues to shame his mother for her remarriage to Claudius until the ghost reappears to remind him of his purpose. However, Gertrude cannot see the ghost and takes Hamlet’s actions as a confirmation of his madness. Polonius’s death sets into motion the events of the rest of the play, as Hamlet leaves for England and Laertes returns to Denmark.

Hamlet Gains Resolve and Laertes Seeks Revenge (Act 4, Scenes 4, 5, and 7): As Hamlet departs for England, he witnesses Fortinbras’s army passing through Denmark. Upon learning that the Norwegian army is fighting with Poland over a relatively useless piece of land, Hamlet is inspired by Fortinbras’s straightforward ambition and pursuit of action. Meanwhile, Laertes arrives at the Danish court with plans to overthrow Claudius as revenge for Polonius’s murder. However, Claudius tells Laertes that Hamlet murdered Polonius, redirecting his ire and setting up the final confrontation between Laertes and Hamlet.

Hamlet Dies (Act 5, Scene 2): Upon returning to Denmark, Hamlet has a newfound resolve to complete his revenge. He sets aside Horatio’s misgivings and agrees to a fencing match with Laertes. Unbeknownst to Hamlet, Claudius and Laertes are working together, and Laertes is using a poisoned sword. During the duel, Gertrude drinks from the poisoned cup that Claudius prepared as a back-up plan for assassinating Hamlet, and both Laertes and Hamlet are injured by the poisoned sword. After Gertrude dies, the injured Laertes informs Hamlet of Claudius’s treachery and requests forgiveness. Hamlet forgives the dying Laertes and then kills Claudius. Horatio attempts to take his own life, but Hamlet stops him, requesting that he instead remain alive in order to clear Hamlet’s reputation after he dies. The play closes as Fortinbras arrives and Horatio prepares to tell Hamlet’s story.

Teaching Guide: History of the Text

Hamlet and the English Renaissance: During the 16th and 17th centuries CE, England underwent a significant artistic and cultural shift, a period often referred to as the English Renaissance. The English Renaissance saw an increased interest in classical antiquity, specifically Greco-Roman art and philosophy. Hamlet, which is thought to have been written around 1601 CE, is filled with allusions to Greek myths and epics, such as the story of Pyrrhus, Hecuba, and Priam. Alongside increased interest in Greco-Roman culture, the English Renaissance also featured a philosophical and artistic shift towards humanism, a movement that brought individual thoughts, feelings, and motivations to the forefront of literary contemplation.

- Between 1570 and 1592, French humanist Michel de Montaigne published a series of essays demonstrating the subjectivity of human experience. His essays exemplify the idea that humans lack the ability to discern absolute truths about the world without divine intervention.
- Hamlet contains many parallels to this philosophy, portraying Prince Hamlet as someone who is able to recognize the subjectivity of human experiences. His empathy for Laertes and procrastination in killing Claudius showcase both Hamlet’s complex inner workings and the unknowable nature of absolute truth. The play is also filled with subtle contradictions, further highlighting that one’s knowledge of other humans is based on appearances and assumptions, complicating the very notion of a definitive reality.

The Influence of the Protestant Reformation on Hamlet: In 1517, Martin Luther published his 95 theses criticizing the perceived corruption and commodification of salvation within the Catholic Church. This began the Protestant Reformation and caused the schism between the traditional Catholic Church and the Protestants, who sought to reform the church. Though Hamlet is believed to be set in the 14th or 15th century, predating the Protestant Reformation, the conflict between Catholicism and Protestantism was particularly pressing for Elizabethan audiences. In 1559, Queen Elizabeth I established a religious settlement between the two sects, reaffirming the Protestant Church of England’s independence from papal authority. England was increasingly a Protestant country, but many Catholic traditions persisted in private.
The influences of Protestant thought are especially prevalent in Hamlet’s interactions with the ghost. Protestants rejected the Catholic doctrine of purgatory, where souls destined for heaven were supposedly sent to undergo purification. The ghost claims to be in purgatory, suffering for its crimes in life. From the Catholic perspective, this is a reasonable claim. However, Protestant theology renounced the idea that deceased human souls could return to Earth, and therefore ghosts were seen as evil beings.

**Inspiration and Source Material for Hamlet:** Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* is thought to draw from the legend of Amleth, a figure in medieval Scandinavian folklore. Saxo Grammaticus’s *Gesta Danorum*, a compilation of myths and histories of the Danish people published in the 12th century CE, details the legend of Amleth. During the 16th century, François de Belleforest translated Saxo Grammaticus’s version into French in his *Histoires Tragiquest*, adding significant prosaic embellishment and introducing Amleth’s melancholic nature. *Hamlet* is also likely inspired by the genre of the revenge tragedy, popularized in the Elizabethan era by works like Thomas Kyd’s *The Spanish Tragedy* (1592).

**Hamlet’s Publication History:** There are three distinct text versions of *Hamlet*: the First Quarto (Q1), the Second Quarto (Q2), and the First Folio (F1). Though Q1 was technically the first version released in print, published in 1603, it was not discovered until 1823. The language in Q1 differs significantly from both Q2, published in 1604, and F1, published in 1623. It also runs 1,600 lines shorter than either of the later texts and contains an extra scene, which shows Horatio and Gertrude discussing Hamlet’s return from England.

**Teaching Guide: Significant Allusions**

**Allusions to Ancient Greece and Rome:** The English Renaissance brought about a resurgent interest in classical antiquity, including Greco-Roman mythology and history. Shakespeare uses allusions to both historical and mythological figures in order to develop the play’s themes and characters. Notable mythological allusions in *Hamlet* include the following:

- In act 2, scene 2, Hamlet asks the players to recite a scene about Pyrrhus, Priam, and Hecuba. In Greek mythology, Pyrrhus, also known as Neoptolemus, is the son of Achilles, the legendary Greek warrior. According to Virgil’s *Aeneid*, Pyrrhus brutally slaughters the defenseless Priam, King of Troy, along with most of Priam’s children. Hecuba, Priam’s wife, is left to grieve, wailing and tearing her hair out. This allusion can be interpreted in a variety of ways. By one reading, Pyrrhus represents Claudius, since both of them are bloodthirsty murderers who kill a defenseless king. By another reading, Pyrrhus represents Hamlet himself, as Hamlet intends to murder Claudius in retribution and coat himself in blood. Hecuba’s inconsolable grief is most likely a contrast for Gertrude’s hasty remarriage, as Hamlet feels she did not sufficiently grieve her husband’s death.
• Hamlet alludes to **Hercules** while describing himself in act 1, scene 2, saying that he is as different from Hercules as Claudius is from King Hamlet. This allusion offers insight into Hamlet’s view of himself and foreshadows his eventual descent into corruption. Hamlet does not view himself as a mighty hero like Hercules. Through this allusion, Hamlet incidentally aligns himself with Claudius, whom he portrays as similarly inferior. Just as Hamlet cannot live up to Hercules, Claudius is a lustful, drunken “**satyr**” in comparison to the almost godly King Hamlet.

• Hamlet alludes to **Alexander the Great** and **Julius Caesar** in act 5, scene 1, as he ponders Yorick’s skull and the nature of death. Alexander the Great and Julius Caesar were both revered as strong and capable leaders, unmatched in military prowess. This allusion serves as a reminder to both Hamlet and readers that great men die just the same as anyone else, returning to “dust” and paving the way for new generations.

**Biblical Allusions:** **Hamlet** contains several major biblical allusions, adding depth to the religious conflict that the characters face and more firmly situating the story in a religious context.

• After King Hamlet’s death, Claudius spreads the rumor that the deceased king was stung by a poisonous serpent. This is an allusion to the biblical story of the **Fall of Man** from the book of Genesis, wherein Adam and Eve were tempted by a serpent into eating the forbidden fruit from the Tree of Knowledge, plunging mankind into sin and mortality. By comparing Claudius to a “serpent,” King Hamlet aligns Claudius with corruption and evil.

• After watching Hamlet’s play, *The Mousetrap*, Claudius attempts to pray for forgiveness in act 3, scene 3. While doing so, he refers to the “**primal eldest curse**,” an allusion to the biblical story of **Cain and Abel**. According to the book of Genesis, Cain and Abel are the sons of Adam and Eve. Cain, the firstborn, kills his brother, Abel, after God prefers Abel’s sacrifice over his, thereby committing the first murder. Cain then attempts to lie to God about the murder, and God curses him to a life of wandering. Much like Cain, Claudius murders his brother out of jealousy and then lies about it to the people of Denmark, bringing Cain’s “primal eldest curse” upon himself.

• In act 2, scene 2, Hamlet refers to Polonius as “**Jephthah,**” alluding to a story from Judges 11. Jephthah, a military leader, makes a rash vow that if he can gain victory over the Ammonites, he will sacrifice whoever first greets him after he returns home. **Jephthah’s only daughter** is the first to greet him. She agrees to help uphold her father’s vow but asks for a two-month reprieve so that she may lament that she will die a virgin. This allusion illuminates Ophelia’s character as much as it does Polonius’s. It provides insight into Ophelia’s virtue and obedience and Polonius’s willingness to sacrifice his daughter for his own gains, as seen when he uses her to spy on Hamlet.

• In act 5, scene 2, Hamlet brushes aside Horatio’s warnings about the duel, instead choosing to “defy augury.” In doing so, Hamlet alludes to Matthew 10 by positing that there is “**providence in the fall of a sparrow.**” In Matthew 10, Jesus tells his apostles that no sparrow falls to the ground without God’s willing it. This allusion establishes Hamlet’s acceptance of his fate and foreshadows his own “fall,” adding a layer of divine intent to the tragic ending of the play.

**Teaching Guide: Teaching Approaches**

**The Conflict Between Appearance and Reality:** Between Claudius’s “smiling villainy,” Hamlet’s alleged madness, and the ghost’s cryptic nature, *Hamlet* is full of ambiguity. By the end of the play, every character except for Horatio believes that Hamlet has truly gone mad. Hamlet’s madness begins as an act, but the question of whether his madness might be real has plagued readers since the play’s debut. The difficulty in discerning appearance from reality can be further explored through the nature of the ghost. A major part of Hamlet’s inability to take revenge against Claudius rests in his own uncertainty regarding the ghost’s claims. The untrustworthiness of appearances and the unknowability of reality limit Hamlet’s ability to act.
For discussion: Do you think that Hamlet’s madness is real or feigned? How does Hamlet’s mental state inform how you read the play?

For discussion: In what ways does Hamlet doubt the ghost’s reality? The ghost’s identity? How do Hamlet’s doubts about the ghost impact the way he approaches his revenge? How does the play’s stance on revenge change when the ghost is considered from different perspectives?

For discussion: How do different characters confront the conflict between appearances and reality? Is Hamlet’s judgment objective or subjective? What factors influence his understanding of the characters around him?

Revenge as Theme: Revenge is the catalyst for the plot of Hamlet, and it is modeled in three different ways by Hamlet, Laertes, and Fortinbras. All three characters have lost a beloved father and are called upon to avenge them. Laertes and Fortinbras are quick to action, whereas Hamlet is not totally convinced of the ghost’s claims and instead decides to obtain more tangible proof. The morality of murder and revenge is a frequent source of angst for Hamlet, who has difficulty reconciling his own values with the gruesome task the ghost has given him.

For discussion: Does the play advocate for or against revenge? Is Hamlet’s revenge successful? What does the play suggest makes someone a successful avenger?

For discussion: What evidence in the text suggests that revenge is cyclical? Do you think that the cycle will end with Hamlet? Why or why not?

Hamlet as a Religiously Conflicted Character: Hamlet’s character and the conflicts he faces are deeply rooted in Christian beliefs. Furthermore, the play situates his uncertainty about the ghost in the conflict between Catholicism and Protestantism, which Shakespeare’s contemporaries experienced firsthand. Traditional Catholic doctrine affirmed the existence of purgatorial ghosts, which is what the ghost in Hamlet claims to be. Purgatorial ghosts were spirits of the dead who could ask their families to give offerings or pray for them in order to reduce their time in purgatory, an intermediate state between heaven and hell. However, Protestants rejected the doctrine of purgatory and believed that ghosts were mere manifestations of evil. Furthermore, Protestants considered revenge itself to be at odds with Christian beliefs.

For discussion: How is Hamlet’s sense of filial obedience at odds with his religious beliefs? How do religious values obstruct Hamlet’s pursuit of revenge? To what extent can Hamlet be read as a play about resisting the temptations of sin?

For discussion: How does Hamlet’s religious conflict echo the cultural landscape of Elizabethan England? How does this knowledge affect your reading of the play?

For discussion: How do other characters in Hamlet experience religious conflict? Consider Claudius as a Cain-like figure and Ophelia’s alleged suicide.

Isolation as Theme: Hamlet begins as an emotionally isolated figure. He continues to mourn his father in the midst of a court that has moved on to celebrating a wedding. His knowledge of his father’s murder serves to deepen this isolation, driving him to mistrust everyone except Horatio. Ophelia’s abandonment, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern’s spying, and his mother’s marriage to Claudius leave Hamlet almost completely alone. Other characters also experience their own forms of isolation, most notably Ophelia’s physically isolation as a result of her family’s insistence that she avoid Hamlet. Even Claudius is mentally isolated by his knowledge of his “foul and most unnatural murder,” forced as he is to stew in private guilt.

For discussion: What mental and physical factors contribute to Hamlet’s isolation? How might the story have gone differently if Hamlet had sought out allies rather than isolating himself?

For discussion: What factors contribute to Ophelia’s isolation? How is Ophelia’s story representative of the status of women in Elizabethan England?
**For discussion:** Do you think there is a relationship between isolation and madness in the cases of Hamlet and Ophelia? Why or why not?

**The Uncertainty of Death as Theme:** Death pervades *Hamlet*, which begins with the murder of King Hamlet and ends with the deaths of all its principal characters. Hamlet spends much of the play soliloquizing about suicide, held back by his uncertainty with regards to what lays beyond the “mortal coil.” Symbols such as Yorick’s skull stand as a testament to Hamlet’s questions about death. In particular, Hamlet grapples with the meaning of life’s fleeting attainments in the face of death’s mystery.

**For discussion:** How do Hamlet’s views on death evolve throughout the play? To what extent has Hamlet accepted his own death by the end of the play?

**For discussion:** How does religion influence the play’s portrayal of death?

**For discussion:** What does Hamlet’s conversation with the First Clown in the Graveyard reveal about how different characters view death? What does Yorick’s skull symbolize?

**Tricky Issues to Approach While Teaching**

**Shakespeare’s Diction and Syntax Are Unfamiliar:** Shakespearean texts may present a challenge for students because of their unfamiliar vocabulary and verse structure. However, it is important to remind students that *Hamlet* is written in Early Modern English and is intelligible to modern readers with a bit of practice.

- **What to do:** Provide students with a vocabulary sheet of unfamiliar words prior to each assigned section of reading. Consider going over the plot of the play in advance so that students have more context for unfamiliar words and phrases.
- **What to do:** Consider reading the first few sections of the text in class so that students aren’t overwhelmed when trying to read independently. Provide ample opportunities for collaborative reading and discussion so that students can ask questions of and help educate their peers.
- **What to do:** Consider giving students the opportunity in class to read the text aloud or to hear the text read aloud to gain a better understanding of how Shakespeare’s meter and diction sound.
- **What to do:** Encourage students to keep track of difficult words, phrases, or concepts as they read. Consider addressing common points of confusion as a class.

**Hamlet Is Full of Ambiguity:** Though the ambiguities in *Hamlet* have contributed to its continued relevance in both academia and popular culture, they can also provide a source of confusion and frustration for students seeking definitive answers. Topics such as Hamlet’s madness have the potential to be divisive during classroom discussions.

- **What to do:** Screen scenes from different film or stage versions of the play, or split students into small groups and have each group perform their interpretation of an assigned scene. Remind students that *Hamlet* was written for the stage and that readers, audiences, and actors alike must interpret the text.
- **What to do:** Host mock-debates and assign different students or groups of students perspectives that they must adopt.
- **What to do:** Have students read supplemental texts such as Margaret Atwood’s “Gertrude Talks Back” so as to gain a better understanding of textual ambiguity. Consider assigning students a creative project where they must select and respond to one of the ambiguities in *Hamlet*.
Hamlet Is Rife With Misogynistic Rhetoric: Though Prince Hamlet is the protagonist of the story and readers are asked to sympathize with him, his views on women are narrow-minded and demeaning. Furthermore, the emphasis on Ophelia’s virginity and the policing of Gertrude’s sexuality have the potential to alienate contemporary readers.

- **What to do:** Encourage students to engage critically with Hamlet’s misogynistic rhetoric. Where is it coming from? Do Hamlet’s views on women evolve throughout the play? How so?
- **What to do:** Use the text as a jumping off point to discuss contemporary issues. Discuss the historical context in which Hamlet is set and ask students to draw connections or distinctions between Hamlet’s world and the modern day.

Hamlet Depicts Suicidal Ideation and Almost All of the Principal Characters Die: Many contemporary psychologists and literary critics view Hamlet as suffering from mental illness, specifically depression. Hamlet’s soliloquies feature intense self-loathing and suicidal ideation, which can be distressing for students. Additionally, Ophelia’s apparent suicide can be a sensitive topic, and the play ends violently in a combination of murder and treachery.

- **What to do:** Encourage students to consider Hamlet from both a clinical perspective and a literary perspective. Though the language is archaic, much of Hamlet’s enduring popularity is rooted in its psychologically compelling characters. Have students consider the choices made by the characters and discuss how the characters may have been influenced by mental illness.
- **What to do:** Discuss the ending in terms of plot structure and themes. Encourage students to consider why Shakespeare chose to have all of the central characters die. What message does the ending send about the merits of revenge? Is the message convincing? Explain your reasoning.
- **What to do:** Consider assigning students a creative project wherein they must write from Horatio’s perspective after the events of act 5, scene 2. For example, consider having students write eulogies for the characters or a speech to the people of Denmark explaining the events of the play.

Alternative Approaches to Teaching Hamlet

While the main ideas, characters, themes, and discussion questions above are typically the focal points of units involving teaching Hamlet, the following suggestions represent alternative readings that may enrich your students’ experience and understanding of the play.

**Focus on the perspectives of different characters within Hamlet.** Hamlet is a compelling protagonist, but focusing on the experiences of other characters can help enrich the play. How might Ophelia feel after Hamlet tells her to go to a nunnery? How might Gertrude feel about her son’s apparent madness? What may have motivated Claudius to kill his brother?

**Focus on Hamlet as a Renaissance humanist text.** Hamlet is deeply introspective and conflicted—uncommon traits among revenge tragedy protagonists. To what extent is Hamlet a product of the English Renaissance? What might be different had the play been written during a different literary period? What role do the allusions to classical antiquity play in shaping Hamlet as a character and Hamlet as a text?

**Focus on the motif of war and violence.** In act 1, scene 1, the castle guards mention that Elsinore seems to be preparing for war. Fortinbras’s father was killed in battle by King Hamlet, and now Norway is waging war with surrounding nations to regain power. There is also an internal war happening within the castle between Hamlet and Claudius, and in act 4, scene 5, Laertes gathers followers with the intent of overthrowing
Claudius. To what extent is violence a natural part of the world of the play? How might violence be cyclical? Do you think the end of the play will stop the cycle of violence or perpetuate it? Explain your reasoning.

**Teaching Guide: Suggested Essay Topics**

**Act I**
1. Contrast the attitudes towards the death of the old King as expressed by Claudius and Hamlet.

2. Compare the advice given to Ophelia by Laertes and that given by Polonius.

**Act II**
1. Draw a character profile of Polonius from his interactions in this act with Reynaldo (Scene 1), Ophelia (Scene 1), Gertrude and Claudius (Scene 2), Hamlet (Scene 2), and the Players (Scene 2).

2. Compare/contrast the relationship which the King and Queen have with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, to the relationship which Hamlet has with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, as defined in Scene 2.

**Act III**
1. Discuss the thematic connection between Hamlet’s scene with Ophelia where he speaks of *honesty*, his speech to the Players on *acting*, and his speech to Horatio on *flattery*.

2. Compare Claudius’ thoughts on his own guilt as he tries to pray to Gertrude’s recognition of her guilt when confronted by Hamlet.

3. Discuss the grouping of characters from scene to scene in Act III, beginning with a crowded stage in Scene 1 and ending with Gertrude alone in Scene 4. What does Shakespeare achieve with the rapidly changing cast on stage as the action in this act unfolds?

**Act IV**
1. Trace the way Claudius tries to manipulate the following characters in this act in order to achieve his own ends: Gertrude, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, Hamlet, and Laertes.

2. Discuss the implications of Ophelia’s song lyrics. What do they suggest about her relationship with Hamlet, and her grief for her father, especially as causes for her apparent madness?

**Act V**
1. Compare Claudius’ use of the “arranged” fencing match between Laertes and Hamlet to Hamlet’s use of “The Mousetrap,” and his rewriting of the letters carried by Rosencrantz and Guildenstern.

2. Discuss the professions of love and grief expressed at Ophelia’s funeral by Laertes and Hamlet, as compared to similar scenes featuring Claudius, in terms of their implications for the play’s outcome: who is honest, deserving, and just, among the play’s key players?
Short-Answer Quizzes

Short-Answer Quizzes: Act I Questions and Answers

Questions

1. According to Marcellus and Barnardo, whom does the ghost resemble?
2. What happened between the late king of Norway and the late king of Denmark?
3. Who is young Fortinbras and what is he doing?
4. Who is Horatio?
5. Who is Claudius?
6. Who is Gertrude?
7. Who is Prince Hamlet?
8. Who are Polonius and Laertes?
9. Who is Ophelia?
10. According to the ghost, how did Hamlet’s father really die?

Answers

1. They think the ghost resembles the late King Hamlet in his battle armor.
2. Many years ago, King Fortinbras of Norway challenged King Hamlet of Denmark to a one-on-one duel for some land. King Hamlet killed King Fortinbras during the duel and won the land.
3. Young Fortinbras is the son of the late King Fortinbras of Norway. Unbeknownst to his uncle (the current king of Norway), young Fortinbras is assembling men to attack Denmark and reclaim the lands that his father lost in a duel.
4. Horatio is Prince Hamlet’s friend from school.
5. Claudius is the current king of Denmark and the brother of the late King Hamlet. He is now married to his brother’s wife, Queen Gertrude.
6. Gertrude is Prince Hamlet’s mother and the wife of the late King Hamlet. Soon after King Hamlet’s death, she married his brother, Claudius.
7. Prince Hamlet is the son of Queen Gertrude and the late King Hamlet. He is grief-stricken by his father’s recent death and upset over his mother’s hasty remarriage to his uncle.
8. Polonius is one of the king’s favorite courtiers and the father of Laertes and Ophelia. Laertes is a young nobleman who wishes to return to France.
9. The daughter of Polonius and the sister of Laertes, Ophelia is a beautiful young noblewoman. Prince Hamlet has been romantically pursuing her, but Laertes and Polonius urge her to break off the relationship and remain chaste.
10. The ghost reveals that Claudius poured poison into King Hamlet’s ear while he slept. Therefore, King Hamlet’s death was a murder and not an accident.

Short-Answer Quizzes: Act II Questions and Answers

Questions

1. How has Hamlet’s behavior changed?
2. What does Polonius ask Reynaldo to do?
3. Who are Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and why have they been summoned?
4. How has Claudius resolved the situation with young Fortinbras?
5. What does Ophelia report to Polonius about Hamlet?
6. What does Polonius think is the cause of Hamlet’s madness?
7. What does Polonius suggest to the king and queen as a way to test his theory about Hamlet?
8. How does Hamlet react to the appearance of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern?
9. Why is Hamlet upset with himself after hearing the player’s dramatic speech?
10. How does Hamlet intend to use the play to expose Claudius?

Answers

1. As he warned in Act I, Hamlet begins to act erratic and seems to have gone mad.
2. Polonius asks Reynaldo to spy on Laertes in France. He even suggests that Reynaldo spread rumors about Laertes’s wild behavior just to see if anyone confirms them.
3. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Hamlet’s friends from school. Claudius and Gertrude have summoned them in the hope that they might discover the cause of Hamlet’s recent madness.
4. Claudius sent a letter to the king of Norway, who was unaware of young Fortinbras’s plans and quickly reined him in.
5. Ophelia tells Polonius that Hamlet suddenly came into her room, grabbed her, and stared at her strangely without saying a word.
6. Hearing Ophelia’s report, Polonius decides that Hamlet must have been driven mad by his love for Ophelia.
7. Polonius suggests that they conspire to get Hamlet and Ophelia alone in a room together and then secretly observe their interaction.
8. Hamlet is pleased to see his friends at first, but he quickly realizes that they have come on Claudius’s orders.
9. Hamlet is upset that the player can make himself so passionate about a mere fictional story, while Hamlet seemingly can’t muster the same passion for his real-life revenge.
10. Hamlet plans to have the players reenact a scene that resembles his father’s murder, intending to watch Claudius’s reaction closely to see if he’s guilty.

Short-Answer Quizzes: Act III Questions and Answers

Questions

1. How does Hamlet treat Ophelia?
2. What does Claudius decide to do about Hamlet?
3. After watching Ophelia and Hamlet interact, what does Polonius decide to do next?
4. How does Claudius react to the murder scene in the play?
5. Why can’t Claudius pray?
6. Why does Hamlet decide not to kill Claudius when he catches him praying?
7. Why does Polonius insist on eavesdropping on Gertrude and Hamlet’s conversation?
8. What does Hamlet do when he hears someone behind the tapestry in his mother’s room?
9. What does Hamlet tell Gertrude to do?
10. Why does the appearance of the ghost make Gertrude think Hamlet is mad?

Answers

1. Hamlet is cruel to Ophelia and tells her that he never loved her.
2. Claudius decides that Hamlet is too dangerous and unpredictable to have at court, so he decides to send him on a trip to England.
3. Polonius decides that he should hide and listen in on a conversation between Hamlet and Gertrude.
4. At the murder scene, Claudius abruptly stands up and leaves the room.
5. Claudius says he cannot pray, because he feels guilty about his sins. He also is doubtful whether he can even receive heavenly forgiveness, since he is still reaping the rewards of his treacherous acts.
6. Hamlet worries that if he kills Claudius during the very moment he is repenting for his sins, Claudius might go to heaven.
7. Polonius does not think that Gertrude, being Hamlet’s mother, can impartially judge his state of mind.
8. Hamlet thrusts his sword into the tapestry, killing the concealed Polonius.
9. Hamlet urges his mother to repent for her sins and reject his uncle’s advances.
10. Gertrude cannot see the ghost, and seeing Hamlet speaking to (seemingly) nothing nothing convinces her that he is truly insane.

**Short-Answer Quizzes: Act IV Questions and Answers**

**Questions**

1. What bothers Claudius when Gertrude tells him that Hamlet murdered Polonius?
2. What does Hamlet mean when he calls Rosencrantz a “sponge”?
3. Why can’t Claudius simply punish or banish Hamlet openly?
4. What are Claudius’s secret orders to England?
5. Why is Hamlet inspired by Fortinbras?
6. How has Polonius’s death affected Ophelia?
7. How did Hamlet escape the ship bound for England?
8. Why is Laertes angry with Claudius?
9. How do Laertes and Claudius plan to kill Hamlet?
10. What tragic news does Queen Gertrude bring Laertes?

**Answers**

1. Claudius is bothered by the idea that it could have easily been him who was killed, and he is worried about the political backlash he will face as news of Polonius’s murder spreads.
2. Hamlet means that Rosencrantz wants to soak up all the king’s favor and power.
3. Hamlet is very popular with the people of Denmark, which makes it difficult for Claudius to openly act against him.
4. Claudius secretly sends word to England that Hamlet should be executed immediately upon arrival.
5. Hamlet admires Fortinbras’s determination to take action and achieve his goal—no matter the cost.
6. Ophelia has gone mad in the wake of Polonius’s death.
7. Hamlet’s ship was attacked by pirates, and Hamlet boarded the pirate ship and returned to Denmark.
8. Laertes initially blames Claudius for Polonius’s death and Ophelia’s madness, though Claudius quickly redirects his anger toward Hamlet instead.
9. Claudius plans to arrange a public duel between Laertes and Hamlet. Laertes will secretly fight with a sharpened, poisoned sword, which will allow him to kill Hamlet with even the tiniest scratch. As a backup, Claudius plans to offer Hamlet some poisoned wine should Laertes fail to hit him.
10. Queen Gertrude tells Laertes that Ophelia has drowned in the brook.
Short-Answer Quizzes: Act V Questions and Answers

Questions

1. Why is it controversial for Ophelia to be given some form of Christian burial?
2. Why does Hamlet comment on Alexander the Great when he is looking at all the skulls in the ground?
3. How does Hamlet react when he realizes that the funeral he is watching is Ophelia’s?
4. What did Hamlet do when he found out about the king’s secret orders for him to be killed in England?
5. What excuse does Hamlet give Laertes for killing Polonius?
6. What happens to the poisoned wine during the duel?
7. How do both Hamlet and Laertes end up struck by the poisoned sword?
8. What prompts Laertes to confess his and Claudius’s plot to Hamlet?
9. What does Hamlet do once Claudius’s treachery has been exposed?
10. What does Fortinbras do when he arrives and sees the bloody scene?

Answers

1. It is suspected that Ophelia committed suicide, which would traditionally make her ineligible for a Christian burial.
2. Looking at the skulls, Hamlet realizes that all men are equal in death and speculates that the dust of Alexander the Great might now be used in the clay that stops up beer barrels.
3. Hamlet is shaken when he realizes that Ophelia is dead, and he interrupts the service to quarrel with Laertes over who loved Ophelia more.
4. Upon finding the king’s letter, Hamlet switched it out with a letter calling for the immediate execution of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. He then escaped with the pirates, leaving his former friends to their fate.
5. Hamlet tells Laertes that it was his madness that killed Polonius, not him.
6. Gertrude drinks the poisoned wine on accident and dies soon after.
7. Laertes wounds Hamlet with the sword, causing a scuffle in which they accidentally switch swords. Hamlet then wounds Laertes with the poisoned sword.
8. When Queen Gertrude dies, Laertes reveals Claudius’s plot to Hamlet and tells him that, having each been struck with the poisoned sword, they are both about to die.
9. Hamlet kills Claudius, running him through with the poisoned sword and then forcing him to drink the remaining poisoned wine.
10. Fortinbras mentions his claim to the throne (which Hamlet supported) and orders that Hamlet’s body be carried out like a soldier’s.