

# Hamlet



by William Shakespeare

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## Introduction

*Hamlet* is without question the most famous play in the English language. Probably written in 1601 or 1602, the tragedy is a milestone in [Shakespeare's](#) dramatic development; the playwright achieved artistic maturity in this work through his brilliant depiction of the hero's struggle with two opposing forces: moral integrity and the need to avenge his father's murder.

Shakespeare's focus on this conflict was a revolutionary departure from contemporary revenge tragedies, which tended to graphically dramatize violent acts on stage, in that it emphasized the hero's dilemma rather than the depiction of bloody deeds. The dramatist's genius is also evident in his transformation of the play's literary sources—especially the contemporaneous *Ur-Hamlet*—into an exceptional tragedy. The *Ur-Hamlet*, or “original *Hamlet*,” is a lost play that scholars believe was written mere decades before Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, providing much of the dramatic context for the later tragedy. Numerous sixteenth-century records attest to the existence of the *Ur-Hamlet*, with some references linking its composition to Thomas Kyd, the author of *The Spanish Tragedy*. Other principal sources available to Shakespeare were Saxo Grammaticus's *Historiae Danicae* (circa 1200), which features a popular legend with a plot similar to *Hamlet*, and François de Belleforest's *Histoires Tragiques, Extraicts des Oeuvres Italiennes de Bandel* (7 Vols.; 1559-80), which provides an expanded account of the story recorded in the *Historiae Danicae*. From these sources Shakespeare created *Hamlet*, a supremely rich and complex literary work that continues to delight both readers and audiences with its myriad meanings and interpretations.

In the words of Ernest Johnson, “the dilemma of Hamlet the Prince and Man” is “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.... From that dilemma of wrong feelings and right actions, he ultimately emerges, solving the problem by attaining a proper state of mind.” Hamlet endures as the object of universal identification because his central moral dilemma transcends the Elizabethan period, making him a man for all

ages. In his difficult struggle to somehow act within a corrupt world and yet maintain his moral integrity, Hamlet ultimately reflects the fate of all human beings.

## Summary

Prince Hamlet of Denmark is urged by his father's Ghost to avenge his murder at the hands of the dead king's brother, now King Claudius; to make matters worse, Claudius has married the widow, Hamlet's mother, Queen Gertrude. Denmark is under threat of invasion from young Fortinbras, who seeks to regain lands lost to Hamlet's father by Fortinbras's father. Claudius sends word to the King of Norway (Fortinbras's uncle) to curb Fortinbras's aggression. In the meantime, Hamlet feigns madness with his family and friends, including his beloved, Ophelia, sister to Laertes and daughter to Polonius. Both Polonius and Laertes warn Ophelia against Hamlet's amorous advances. Polonius believes Hamlet's "madness" to be love sickness. Laertes is given permission to return to his studies in Paris.

Claudius directs Gertrude to try to learn the cause of Hamlet's odd behavior; they suspect it is the old king's death and their own recent marriage. Meantime, Claudius and Polonius eavesdrop on Ophelia and Hamlet, who spurns her and appears mad. The King reveals to Polonius his plan to send Hamlet to England with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern.

Hamlet seizes the opportunity presented by a traveling troupe of players to expose the King's guilt with a "play within a play." Soon after, Hamlet delays killing Claudius because the King is at prayer, and Hamlet does not wish to send him to heaven instead of hell. When Gertrude meets with Hamlet as Claudius has directed, Polonius hides behind the arras in Gertrude's room to eavesdrop on the conversation. Hamlet, suspecting the interloper is Claudius, stabs and kills Polonius.

When Polonius's body is discovered, Claudius summons Hamlet and tells him he must sail to England for his own safety; Rosencrantz and Guildenstern accompany Hamlet, carrying letters to the English, threatening war unless they kill Hamlet. Hamlet eventually escapes, returns to Denmark, and is met by Horatio.

Ophelia has gone insane after Hamlet's departure and her father's death. Laertes returns and vows to avenge Polonius's death. Claudius contrives a fencing match between Hamlet and Laertes, during which Hamlet is to be injured with a poisoned sword tip and poisoned with a drink, thus assuring his death. When news arrives that Ophelia has drowned herself, Laertes is grief stricken. Hamlet and Horatio happen upon the burial site and funeral cortege; Hamlet tries to fight Laertes but is restrained.

Hamlet tells Horatio that he rewrote the papers carried by Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and that the letters now call for their own deaths. Osric invites Hamlet to the duel with Laertes; Claudius has supposedly bet on Hamlet to win. Gertrude mistakenly drinks from the cup poisoned by Claudius for Hamlet, and dies; Laertes wounds Hamlet with the poisoned sword, and then Hamlet wounds Laertes when they accidentally exchange swords. When Laertes reveals the conspiracy, Hamlet wounds the King and forces the poisoned drink upon him. Laertes and Hamlet reconcile, and Laertes dies; Hamlet prevents Horatio from drinking the poison so that he can live to tell the truth. Hamlet names as his successor young Fortinbras, who arrives and orders Hamlet buried with all dignity.

### Estimated Reading Time

Given a text with abundant and helpful footnotes, an average student should expect to spend at least an hour per act on the first read through; subsequent readings should take less time, as the language becomes more familiar. Certainly a five-hour stretch is not advised; probably a few scenes at a time, or perhaps an entire act, would be a comfortable portion for an average reader. Since there are five acts with a total of twenty scenes, the student could expect to spend at least five hours in perhaps six to eight sessions.

# Biography

Details about William Shakespeare's life are sketchy, mostly mere surmise based upon court or other clerical records. His parents, John and Mary (Arden), were married about 1557; she was of the landed gentry, he a yeoman—a glover and commodities merchant. By 1568, John had risen through the ranks of town government and held the position of high bailiff, similar to mayor. William, the eldest son, was born in 1564, probably on April 23, several days before his baptism on April 26, 1564. That Shakespeare also died on April 23, 52 years later, may have resulted in the adoption of this birthdate.

William no doubt attended the local grammar school in Stratford where his parents lived, and would have studied primarily Latin rhetoric, logic, and literature [Barnet, viii]. At age 18 (1582), William married Anne Hathaway, a local farmer's daughter eight years his senior. Their first daughter (Susanna) was born six months later (1583), and twins Judith and Hamnet were born in 1585.

Shakespeare's life can be divided into three periods: the first 20 years in Stratford, which include his schooling, early marriage, and fatherhood; the next 25 years as an actor and playwright in London; and the last 5 in retirement back in Stratford where he enjoyed moderate wealth gained from his theatrical successes. The years linking the first two periods are marked by a lack of information about Shakespeare, and are often referred to as the "dark years"; the transition from active work into retirement was gradual and cannot be precisely dated [Boyce, 587].

John Shakespeare had suffered financial reverses from William's teen years until well into the height of the playwright's popularity and success. In 1596, John Shakespeare was granted a coat of arms, almost certainly purchased by William, who the next year bought a sizable house in Stratford. By the time of his death, William had substantial properties, both professional and personal, which he bestowed on his theatrical associates and his family (primarily his daughter Susanna, having rewritten his will one month before his death to protect his assets from Judith's new husband, Thomas Quiney, who ran afoul of church doctrine and public esteem before and after the marriage) [Boyce, 529].

Shakespeare probably left school at 15, which was the norm, and took some sort of job, especially since this was the period of his father's financial difficulty. Numerous references in his plays suggest that William may have in fact worked for his father, thereby gaining specialized knowledge [Boyce, 587].

At some point during the "dark years," Shakespeare began his career with a London theatrical company—perhaps in 1589—for he was already an actor and playwright of some note in 1592. Shakespeare apparently wrote and acted for Pembroke's Men, as well as numerous others, in particular Strange's Men, which later became the Chamberlain's Men, with whom he remained for the rest of his career.

When, in 1592, the Plague closed the theaters for about two years, Shakespeare turned to writing book-length narrative poetry. Most notable were "Venus and Adonis" and "The Rape of Lucrece," both of which were dedicated to the Earl of Southampton, whom scholars accept as Shakespeare's friend and benefactor despite a lack of documentation. During this same period, Shakespeare was writing his sonnets, which are more likely signs of the time's fashion rather than actual love poems detailing any particular relationship. He returned to playwriting when theaters reopened in 1594, and published no more poetry. His sonnets were published without his consent in 1609, shortly before his retirement.

Amid all of his success, Shakespeare suffered the loss of his only son, Hamnet, who died in 1596 at the age of 11. But Shakespeare's career continued unabated, and in London in 1599, he became one of the partners in the new Globe Theater [Boyce, 589], built by the Chamberlain's Men. This group was a remarkable assemblage of "excellent actors who were also business partners and close personal friends ... [including]

Richard Burbage ... [who] all worked together as equals ...” [Chute, 131].

When Queen Elizabeth died in 1603 and was succeeded by her cousin King James of Scotland, the Chamberlain’s Men was renamed the King’s Men, and Shakespeare’s productivity and popularity continued uninterrupted. He invested in London real estate and, one year away from retirement, purchased a second theater, the Blackfriars Gatehouse, in partnership with his fellow actors. His final play was *Henry VIII*, two years before his death in 1616.

Incredibly, most of Shakespeare’s plays had never been published in anything except pamphlet form, and were simply extant as acting scripts stored at the Globe. Only the efforts of two of Shakespeare’s company, John Heminges and Henry Condell, preserved his 36 plays (minus *Pericles*, the thirty-seventh) [Barnet, xvii] in the First Folio. Heminges and Condell published the plays, they said, “only to keep the memory of so worthy a friend and fellow alive as was our Shakespeare” [Chute, 133]. Theater scripts were not regarded as literary works of art, but only the basis for the performance. Plays were a popular form of entertainment for all layers of society in Shakespeare’s time, which perhaps explains why Hamlet feels compelled to instruct the traveling Players on the fine points of acting, urging them not “to split the ears of the groundlings,” nor “speak no more than is set down for them.”

Present copies of Shakespeare’s plays have, in some cases, been reconstructed in part from scripts written down by various members of an acting company who performed particular roles. Shakespeare’s plays, like those of many of the actors who also were playwrights, belonged to the acting company. The performance, rather than the script, was what concerned the author, for that was how his play would become popular—and how the company, in which many actors were shareholders, would make money.

William Shakespeare died on April 23, 1616, and was buried two days later in the chancel of Holy Trinity Church, where he had been baptized exactly 52 years earlier.

## Reading Shakespeare

In this section:

- [Shakespeare’s Language](#)
- [Shakespeare’s Sentences](#)
- [Shakespeare’s Words](#)
- [Shakespeare’s Wordplay](#)
- [Shakespeare’s Dramatic Verse](#)
- [Implied Stage Action](#)

### Shakespeare’s Language

Shakespeare’s language can create a strong pang of intimidation, even fear, in a large number of modern-day readers. Fortunately, however, this need not be the case. All that is needed to master the art of reading Shakespeare is to practice the techniques of unraveling uncommonly structured sentences and to become familiar with the poetic use of uncommon words. We must realize that during the 400-year span between Shakespeare’s time and our own, both the way we live and speak has changed. Although most of his vocabulary is in use today, some of it is obsolete, and what may be most confusing is that some of his words are used today, but with slightly different or totally different meanings. On the stage, actors readily dissolve these language stumbling blocks. They study Shakespeare’s dialogue and express it dramatically in word and in action so that its meaning is graphically enacted. If the reader studies Shakespeare’s lines as an actor does, looking up and reflecting upon the meaning of unfamiliar words until real voice is discovered, he or she will suddenly experience the excitement, the depth, and the sheer poetry of what these characters say.

## Shakespeare's Sentences

In English, or any other language, the meaning of a sentence greatly depends upon where each word is placed in that sentence. "The child hurt the mother" and "The mother hurt the child" have opposite meanings, even though the words are the same, simply because the words are arranged differently. Because word position is so integral to English, the reader will find unfamiliar word arrangements confusing, even difficult to understand. Since Shakespeare's plays are poetic dramas, he often shifts from average word arrangements to the strikingly unusual so that the line will conform to the desired poetic rhythm. Often, too, Shakespeare employs unusual word order to afford a character his own specific style of speaking.

Today, English sentence structure follows a sequence of subject first, verb second, and an optional object third. Shakespeare, however, often places the verb before the subject, which reads, "Speaks he" rather than "He speaks." Solanio speaks with this inverted structure in *The Merchant of Venice*, stating, "I should be still / Plucking the grass to know where sits the wind" (Bevington edition, I.i.17-19), while today's standard English word order would have the clause at the end of this line read, "where the wind sits." "Wind" is the subject of this clause, and "sits" is the verb. Bassanio's words in Act Two also exemplify this inversion: "And in such eyes as ours appear not faults" (II.ii.184). In our normal word order, we would say, "Faults do not appear in eyes such as ours," with "faults" as the subject in both Shakespeare's word order and ours.

Inversions like these are not troublesome, but when Shakespeare positions the predicate adjective or the object before the subject and verb, we are sometimes surprised. For example, rather than "I saw him," Shakespeare may use a structure such as "Him I saw." Similarly, "Cold the morning is" would be used for our "The morning is cold." Lady Macbeth demonstrates this inversion as she speaks of her husband: "Glamis thou art, and Cawdor, and shalt be / What thou art promised" (*Macbeth*, I.v.14-15). In current English word order, this quote would begin, "Thou art Glamis, and Cawdor."

In addition to inversions, Shakespeare purposefully keeps words apart that we generally keep together. To illustrate, consider Bassanio's humble admission in *The Merchant of Venice*: "I owe you much, and, like a wilful youth, / That which I owe is lost" (I.i.146-47). The phrase, "like a wilful youth," separates the regular sequence of "I owe you much" and "That which I owe is lost." To understand more clearly this type of passage, the reader could rearrange these word groups into our conventional order: I owe you much and I wasted what you gave me because I was young and impulsive. While these rearranged clauses will sound like normal English, and will be simpler to understand, they will no longer have the desired poetic rhythm, and the emphasis will now be on the wrong words.

As we read Shakespeare, we will find words that are separated by long, interruptive statements. Often subjects are separated from verbs, and verbs are separated from objects. These long interruptions can be used to give a character dimension or to add an element of suspense. For example, in *Romeo and Juliet*, Benvolio describes both Romeo's moodiness and his own sensitive and thoughtful nature:

I, measuring his affections by my own,  
Which then most sought, where most might not be found,  
Being one too many by my weary self,  
Pursu'd my humour, not pursuing his,  
And gladly shunn'd who gladly fled from me.  
(I.i.126-30)

In this passage, the subject "I" is distanced from its verb "Pursu'd." The long interruption serves to provide information which is integral to the plot. Another example, taken from *Hamlet*, is the ghost, Hamlet's father, who describes Hamlet's uncle, Claudius, as

... 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.  
(I.v.43-47)

From this we learn that Prince Hamlet's mother is the victim of an evil seduction and deception. The delay between the subject, "beast," and the verb, "won," creates a moment of tension filled with the image of a cunning predator waiting for the right moment to spring into attack. This interruptive passage allows the play to unfold crucial information and thus to build the tension necessary to produce a riveting drama.

While at times these long delays are merely for decorative purposes, they are often used to narrate a particular situation or to enhance character development. As *Antony and Cleopatra* opens, an interruptive passage occurs in the first few lines. Although the delay is not lengthy, Philo's words vividly portray Antony's military prowess while they also reveal the immediate concern of the drama. Antony is distracted from his career, and is now focused on Cleopatra:

... those goodly eyes,  
That o'er the files and musters of the war  
Have glow'd like plated Mars, now bend, now turn  
The office and devotion of their view  
Upon a tawny front....  
(I.i.2-6)

Whereas Shakespeare sometimes heaps detail upon detail, his sentences are often elliptical; that is, they omit words we expect in written English sentences. In fact, we often do this in our spoken conversations. For instance, we say, "You see that?" when we really mean, "Did you see that?" Reading poetry or listening to lyrics in music conditions us to supply the omitted words and it makes us more comfortable reading this type of dialogue. Consider one passage in *The Merchant of Venice* where Antonio's friends ask him why he seems so sad and Solanio tells Antonio, "Why, then you are in love" (I.i.46). When Antonio denies this, Solanio responds, "Not in love neither?" (I.i.47). The word "you" is omitted but understood despite the confusing double negative.

In addition to leaving out words, Shakespeare often uses intentionally vague language, a strategy which taxes the reader's attentiveness. In *Antony and Cleopatra*, Cleopatra, upset that Antony is leaving for Rome after learning that his wife died in battle, convinces him to stay in Egypt:

Sir, you and I must part, but that's not it:  
Sir you and I have lov'd, but there's not it;  
That you know well, something it is I would—  
O, my oblivion is a very Antony,  
And I am all forgotten.  
(I.iii.87-91)

In line 89, "... something it is I would" suggests that there is something that she would want to say, do, or have done. The intentional vagueness leaves us, and certainly Antony, to wonder. Though this sort of writing may appear lackadaisical for all that it leaves out, here the vagueness functions to portray Cleopatra as rhetorically sophisticated. Similarly, when asked what thing a crocodile is (meaning Antony himself who is being compared to a crocodile), Antony slyly evades the question by giving a vague reply:



It is shap'd, sir, like itself, and it is as broad as it hath breadth.  
It is just so high as it is, and moves with it own organs.  
It lives by that which nourisheth it, and, the elements once out of it, it transmigrates.  
(II.vii.43-46)

This kind of evasiveness, or doubletalk, occurs often in Shakespeare's writing and requires extra patience on the part of the reader.

### Shakespeare's Words

As we read Shakespeare's plays, we will encounter uncommon words. Many of these words are not in use today. As *Romeo and Juliet* opens, we notice words like "shrift" (confession) and "holidame" (a holy relic). Words like these should be explained in notes to the text. Shakespeare also employs words which we still use, though with different meaning. For example, in *The Merchant of Venice*, "caskets" refer to small, decorative chests for holding jewels. However, modern readers may think of a large cask instead of the smaller, diminutive casket.

Another trouble modern readers will have with Shakespeare's English is with words that are still in use today, but which mean something different in Elizabethan use. In *The Merchant of Venice*, Shakespeare uses the word "straight" (as in "straight away") where we would say "immediately." Here, the modern reader is unlikely to carry away the wrong message, however, since the modern meaning will simply make no sense. In this case, textual notes will clarify a phrase's meaning. To cite another example, in *Romeo and Juliet* after Mercutio dies, Romeo states that the "black fate on moe days doth *depend*" [emphasis added]. In this case, "depend" really means "impend."

### Shakespeare's Wordplay

All of Shakespeare's works exhibit his mastery of playing with language and with such variety that many people have authored entire books on this subject alone. Shakespeare's most frequently used types of wordplay are common: metaphors, similes, synecdoche and metonymy, personification, allusion, and puns. It is when Shakespeare violates the normal use of these devices, or rhetorical figures, that the language becomes confusing.

A metaphor is a comparison in which an object or idea is replaced by another object or idea with common attributes. For example, in *Macbeth*, a murderer tells Macbeth that Banquo has been murdered, as directed, but that his son, Fleance, escaped, having witnessed his father's murder. Fleance, now a threat to Macbeth, is described as a serpent:

There the grown serpent lies, the worm that's fled  
Hath nature that in time will venom breed,  
No teeth for the present.  
(III.iv.29-31)

Similes, on the other hand, compare objects or ideas while using the words "like" or "as." In *Romeo and Juliet*, Romeo tells Juliet that "love goes toward love as schoolboys from their books" (II.ii.156). Such similes often give way to more involved comparisons, "extended similes." For example, Juliet tells Romeo:

'Tis almost morning,  
I would have thee gone,  
And yet no farther than a wonton's bird,  
That lets it hop a little from his hand  
Like a poor prisoner in his twisted gyves,  
And with silken thread plucks it back again,

So loving-jealous of his liberty.  
(II.ii.176-81)

An epic simile, a device borrowed from heroic poetry, is an extended simile that builds into an even more elaborate comparison. In *Macbeth*, Macbeth describes King Duncan's virtues with an angelic, celestial simile and then drives immediately into another simile that redirects us into a vision of warfare and destruction:

... Besides this Duncan  
Hath borne his faculties so meek, hath been  
So clear in his great office, that his virtues  
Will plead like angels, trumpet-tongued, against  
The deep damnation of his taking-off;  
And pity, like a naked new-born babe,  
Striding the blast, or heaven's cherubim, horsed  
Upon the sightless couriers of the air,  
Shall blow the horrid deed in every eye,  
That tears shall drown the wind....  
(I.vii.16-25)

Shakespeare employs other devices, like synecdoche and metonymy, to achieve "verbal economy," or using one or two words to express more than one thought. Synecdoche is a figure of speech using a part for the whole. An example of synecdoche is using the word boards to imply a stage. Boards are only a small part of the materials that make up a stage; however, the term boards has become a colloquial synonym for stage. Metonymy is a figure of speech using the name of one thing for that of another which it is associated. An example of metonymy is using crown to mean the king (as used in the sentence "These lands belong to the crown"). Since a crown is associated with or an attribute of the king, the word crown has become a metonymy for the king. It is important to understand that every metonymy is a synecdoche, but not every synecdoche is a metonymy. This rule is true because a metonymy must not only be a part of the root word, making a synecdoche, but also be a unique attribute of or associated with the root word.

Synecdoche and metonymy in Shakespeare's works is often very confusing to a new student because he creates uses for words that they usually do not perform. This technique is often complicated and yet very subtle, which makes it difficult of a new student to dissect and understand. An example of these devices in one of Shakespeare's plays can be found in *The Merchant of Venice*. In warning his daughter, Jessica, to ignore the Christian revelries in the streets below, Shylock says:

Lock up my doors; and when you hear the drum  
And the vile squealing of the wry-necked fife,  
Clamber not you up to the casements then....  
(I.v.30-32)

The phrase of importance in this quote is "the wry-necked fife." When a reader examines this phrase it does not seem to make sense; a fife is a cylinder-shaped instrument, there is no part of it that can be called a neck. The phrase then must be taken to refer to the fife-player, who has to twist his or her neck to play the fife. Fife, therefore, is a synecdoche for fife-player, much as boards is for stage. The trouble with understanding this phrase is that "vile squealing" logically refers to the sound of the fife, not the fife-player, and the reader might be led to take fife as the instrument because of the parallel reference to "drum" in the previous line. The best solution to this quandary is that Shakespeare uses the word fife to refer to both the instrument and the player. Both the player and the instrument are needed to complete the wordplay in this phrase, which, though difficult to understand to new readers, cannot be seen as a flaw since Shakespeare manages to convey two meanings with one word. This remarkable example of synecdoche illuminates Shakespeare's mastery of

“verbal economy.”

Shakespeare also uses vivid and imagistic wordplay through personification, in which human capacities and behaviors are attributed to inanimate objects. Bassanio, in *The Merchant of Venice*, almost speechless when Portia promises to marry him and share all her worldly wealth, states, “My blood speaks to you in my veins ...” (III.ii.176). How deeply he must feel since even his blood can speak. Similarly, Portia, learning of the penalty that Antonio must pay for defaulting on his debt, tells Salerio, “There are some shrewd contents in yond same paper / That steals the color from Bassanio’s cheek” (III.ii.243-44).

Another important facet of Shakespeare’s rhetorical repertoire is his use of allusion. An allusion is a reference to another author or to an historical figure or event. Very often Shakespeare alludes to the heroes and heroines of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. For example, in *Cymbeline*, an entire room is decorated with images illustrating the stories from this classical work, and the heroine, Imogen, has been reading from this text. Similarly, in *Titus Andronicus*, characters not only read directly from the *Metamorphoses*, but a subplot re-enacts one of the *Metamorphoses*’s most famous stories, the rape and mutilation of Philomel. Another way Shakespeare uses allusion is to drop names of mythological, historical and literary figures. In *The Taming of the Shrew*, for instance, Petruchio compares Katharina, the woman whom he is courting, to Diana (II.i.55), the virgin goddess, in order to suggest that Katharina is a man-hater. At times, Shakespeare will allude to well-known figures without so much as mentioning their names. In *Twelfth Night*, for example, though the Duke and Valentine are ostensibly interested in Olivia, a rich countess, Shakespeare asks his audience to compare the Duke’s emotional turmoil to the plight of Acteon, whom the goddess Diana transforms into a deer to be hunted and killed by Acteon’s own dogs:

Duke:

That instant was I turn’d into a hart,  
And my desires, like fell and cruel hounds,  
E’er since pursue me. [...]

Valentine:

But like a cloistress she will veiled walk,  
And water once a day her chamber round....  
(I.i.20 ff.)

Shakespeare’s use of puns spotlights his exceptional wit. His comedies in particular are loaded with puns, usually of a sexual nature. Puns work through the ambiguity that results when multiple senses of a word are evoked; homophones often cause this sort of ambiguity. In *Antony and Cleopatra*, Enobarbus believes “there is mettle in death” (I.ii.146), meaning that there is “courage” in death; at the same time, mettle suggests the homophone metal, referring to swords made of metal causing death. In early editions of Shakespeare’s work, there was no distinction made between the two words. Antony puns on the word “earring,” meaning both plowing (as in rooting out weeds) and hearing: he angrily sends away a messenger, not wishing to hear the message from his wife, Fulvia: “... O then we bring forth weeds, / When our quick minds lie still, and our ills told us / Is as our earring” (I.ii.112-14). If ill-natured news is planted in one’s “hearing,” it will render an “earring” (harvest) of ill-natured thoughts. A particularly clever pun, also in *Antony and Cleopatra*, stands out after Antony’s troops have fought Octavius’s men in Egypt: “We have beat him to his camp. Run one before, / And let the queen know of our gests” (IV.viii.1-2). Here “gests” means deeds (in this case, deeds of battle); it is also a pun on “guests,” as though Octavius’ slain soldiers were to be guests when buried in Egypt.

One should note that Elizabethan pronunciation was in several cases different from our own. Thus, modern readers, especially Americans, will miss out on the many puns based on homophones. The textual notes will point up many of these “lost” puns, however.

Shakespeare's sexual innuendoes can be either clever or tedious depending upon the speaker and situation. The modern reader should recall that sexuality in Shakespeare's time was far more complex than in ours and that characters may refer to such things as masturbation and homosexual activity. Textual notes in some editions will point out these puns but rarely explain them. An example of a sexual pun or innuendo can be found in *The Merchant of Venice* when Portia and Nerissa are discussing Portia's past suitors using innuendo to tell of their sexual prowess:

Portia:

I pray thee, overname them, and as thou namest them, I will describe them, and according to my description level at my affection.

Nerissa:

First, there is the Neapolitan prince.

Portia:

Ay, that's a colt indeed, for he doth nothing but talk of his horse, and he makes it a great appropriation to his own good parts that he can shoe him himself. I am much afraid my lady his mother played false with the smith.

(I.ii.35-45)

The "Neapolitan prince" is given a grade of an inexperienced youth when Portia describes him as a "colt." The prince is thought to be inexperienced because he did nothing but "talk of his horse" (a pun for his penis) and his other great attributes. Portia goes on to say that the prince boasted that he could "shoe him [his horse] himself," a possible pun meaning that the prince was very proud that he could masturbate. Finally, Portia makes an attack upon the prince's mother, saying that "my lady his mother played false with the smith," a pun to say his mother must have committed adultery with a blacksmith to give birth to such a vulgar man having an obsession with "shoeing his horse."

It is worth mentioning that Shakespeare gives the reader hints when his characters might be using puns and innuendoes. In *The Merchant of Venice*, Portia's lines are given in prose when she is joking, or engaged in bawdy conversations. Later on the reader will notice that Portia's lines are rhymed in poetry, such as when she is talking in court or to Bassanio. This is Shakespeare's way of letting the reader know when Portia is jesting and when she is serious.

### **Shakespeare's Dramatic Verse**

Finally, the reader will notice that some lines are actually rhymed verse while others are in verse without rhyme; and much of Shakespeare's drama is in prose. Shakespeare usually has his lovers speak in the language of love poetry which uses rhymed couplets. The archetypal example of this comes, of course, from *Romeo and Juliet*:

The grey-ey'd morn smiles on the frowning night,  
Check'ring the eastern clouds with streaks of light,  
And fleckled darkness like a drunkard reels  
From forth day's path and Titan's fiery wheels.

(II.iii.1-4)

Here it is ironic that Friar Lawrence should speak these lines since he is not the one in love. He, therefore, appears buffoonish and out of touch with reality. Shakespeare often has his characters speak in rhymed verse to let the reader know that the character is acting in jest, and vice versa.

Perhaps the majority of Shakespeare's lines are in blank verse, a form of poetry which does not use rhyme (hence the name blank) but still employs a rhythm native to the English language, iambic pentameter, where every second syllable in a line of ten syllables receives stress. Consider the following verses from *Hamlet*, and note the accents and the lack of end rhyme:

The síngle ánd pecúliar lífe is bóund  
With áll the stréngth and ármor óf the mínd  
(III.iii.12-13)

The final syllable of these verses receives stress and is said to have a hard, or "strong," ending. A soft ending, also said to be "weak," receives no stress. In *The Tempest*, Shakespeare uses a soft ending to shape a verse that demonstrates through both sound (meter) and sense the capacity of the feminine to propagate:

and thén I lóv'd thee  
And shów'd thee áll the quálitíes o' th' ísle,  
The frésh spríngs, bríne-pits, bárren pláce and fértile.  
(I.ii.338-40)

The first and third of these lines here have soft endings.

In general, Shakespeare saves blank verse for his characters of noble birth. Therefore, it is significant when his lofty characters speak in prose. Prose holds a special place in Shakespeare's dialogues; he uses it to represent the speech habits of the common people. Not only do lowly servants and common citizens speak in prose, but important, lower class figures also use this form, at times ribald variety of speech. Though Shakespeare crafts some very ornate lines in verse, his prose can be equally daunting, for some of his characters may speechify and break into doubletalk in their attempts to show sophistication. A clever instance of this comes when the Third Citizen in *Coriolanus* refers to the people's paradoxical lack of power when they must elect Coriolanus as their new leader once Coriolanus has orated how he has courageously fought for them in battle:

We have power in ourselves to do it, but it is a power that we have no power to do; for if he show us his wounds and tell us his deeds, we are to put our tongues into those wounds and speak for them; so, if he tell us his noble deeds, we must also tell him our noble acceptance of them. Ingratitude is monstrous, and for the multitude to be ingrateful were to make a monster of the multitude, of the which we, being members, should bring ourselves to be monstrous members.  
(II.ii.3-13)

Notice that this passage contains as many metaphors, hideous though they be, as any other passage in Shakespeare's dramatic verse.

When reading Shakespeare, paying attention to characters who suddenly break into rhymed verse, or who slip into prose after speaking in blank verse, will heighten your awareness of a character's mood and personal development. For instance, in *Antony and Cleopatra*, the famous military leader Marcus Antony usually speaks in blank verse, but also speaks in fits of prose (II.iii.43-46) once his masculinity and authority have been questioned. Similarly, in *Timon of Athens*, after the wealthy lord Timon abandons the city of Athens to live in a cave, he harangues anyone whom he encounters in prose (IV.iii.331 ff.). In contrast, the reader should wonder why the bestial Caliban in *The Tempest* speaks in blank verse rather than in prose.

### **Implied Stage Action**

When we read a Shakespearean play, we are reading a performance text. Actors interact through dialogue, but

at the same time these actors cry, gesticulate, throw tantrums, pick up daggers, and compulsively wash murderous “blood” from their hands. Some of the action that takes place on stage is explicitly stated in stage directions. However, some of the stage activity is couched within the dialogue itself. Attentiveness to these cues is important as one conceives how to visualize the action. When Iago in *Othello* feigns concern for Cassio whom he himself has stabbed, he calls to the surrounding men, “Come, come: / Lend me a light” (V.i.86-87). It is almost sure that one of the actors involved will bring him a torch or lantern. In the same play, Emilia, Desdemona’s maidservant, asks if she should fetch her lady’s nightgown and Desdemona replies, “No, unpin me here” (IV.iii.37). In *Macbeth*, after killing Duncan, Macbeth brings the murder weapon back with him. When he tells his wife that he cannot return to the scene and place the daggers to suggest that the king’s guards murdered Duncan, she castigates him: “Infirm of purpose! / Give me the daggers. The sleeping and the dead / Are but as pictures” (II.ii.50-52). As she exits, it is easy to visualize Lady Macbeth grabbing the daggers from her husband.

For 400 years, readers have found it greatly satisfying to work with all aspects of Shakespeare’s language—the implied stage action, word choice, sentence structure, and wordplay—until all aspects come to life. Just as seeing a fine performance of a Shakespearean play is exciting, staging the play in one’s own mind’s eye, and revisiting lines to enrich the sense of the action, will enhance one’s appreciation of Shakespeare’s extraordinary literary and dramatic achievements.

## List of Characters

Barnardo, Francisco, Mercurius—sentinels; officers in King of Denmark’s army

Horatio—Prince Hamlet’s friend and confidante; fellow student at Wittenberg

Ghost—of dead King of Denmark, Prince Hamlet’s father; brother of new King, husband of Gertrude

Claudius—brother of dead King of Denmark; now King, and new husband of Queen Gertrude, Prince Hamlet’s mother

Gertrude—Prince Hamlet’s mother, widow of former King, now wife to Claudius, new King

Polonius—King Claudius’s advisor; father to Laertes and Ophelia

Reynaldo—Polonius’s servant, sent to Paris to spy on Laertes

Laertes—son to Polonius, brother to Ophelia; friend to Hamlet

Prince Hamlet—son of the late King, and of Queen Gertrude; nephew-stepson to King Claudius

Voltemand and Cornelius—messengers to King of Norway from Claudius

Ophelia—daughter to Polonius, sister to Laertes, beloved of Hamlet

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern—fellow students of Hamlet at Wittenberg; sent with Hamlet to England by Claudius to murder Hamlet

Osric—messenger who summons Hamlet to duel with Laertes

The Players—actors (adults) who formerly performed in the city, and who are now traveling because of the rising popularity of companies of child actors

Grave diggers—two clowns (rustics) who are disinterring an old grave in order to make way for a new burial, Ophelia

Priest—Doctor of Divinity (church official) presiding at Ophelia’s funeral

Fortinbras—Prince of Norway whose father was killed by Hamlet’s father; assumes throne of Denmark at play’s end

Ambassador—from England, reporting to Claudius

## 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].

## Summary and Analysis

### Act I, Scene 1 Summary and Analysis

#### New Characters

Barnardo, Francisco, and Marcellus: sentinels

Horatio: Hamlet's close friend and confidante

Ghost: of Hamlet's father, the former King of Denmark

#### Summary

Just after the striking of twelve, Francisco is relieved of his watch by Barnardo and Marcellus, who have entreated Horatio to stand with them this night to witness the reappearance of the dead king's apparition. The Ghost appears and disappears twice but does not speak to the four, who decide to tell Hamlet in the morning. They note that a Ghost often portends grave events, and believe the King's Ghost is related to the impending war with young Fortinbras of Norway, who seeks to regain the lands his late father lost in battle with the dead King of Denmark, Hamlet's father.

#### Analysis

The Ghost of Hamlet's father appears for the second time to Barnardo, Marcellus, and Francisco, who are this time accompanied by Horatio, Hamlet's trusted friend and fellow student—perhaps his scholarly title lending credence to the apparition. When they persuade Hamlet to witness the sight, the third time is the charm; the heretofore silent Ghost speaks—but only to Hamlet, whom it has drawn apart, not to the others.

Thus begins one of the play's recurrent motifs: indirection and deception. The various witnesses have different interpretations of the events. The officers assume “that this portentous figure / Comes armed through our watch so like the King / That was and is the question of these wars” with young Fortinbras (109-11). Hamlet, however, learns that his father's Ghost wants him, “If thou didst ever thy dear father love— / ... [to] /



Revenge his foul and most unnatural murder” (I.v.23-25).

## Act I, Scene 2 Summary and Analysis

### New Characters

Claudius, King of Denmark: Prince Hamlet’s uncle and stepfather

Gertrude, the Queen: Hamlet’s mother

Polonius: the King’s advisor

Laertes: son to Polonius

Prince Hamlet: son of the late King and Queen Gertrude

Voltemand and Cornelius: messengers to King of Norway

### Summary

King Claudius announces that, despite his grief over his brother’s recent death, he has taken Gertrude to wife. He also informs the court of young Fortinbras’s aggression, and assigns Voltemand and Cornelius to deliver a dispatch to the King of Norway (Fortinbras’s uncle) urging that he restrain his nephew. Laertes asks the King’s permission to return to France, which he left to attend the coronation. The King grants the request, being assured that Polonius also assents. The King and Queen then urge Hamlet to cease his mourning, and to abandon his plan to return to his studies in Wittenberg; Hamlet agrees.

Everyone departs, leaving Hamlet alone to lament his mother’s hasty remarriage to a man less worthy than her first husband, Hamlet’s father. Horatio, Marcellus, and Barnardo enter and tell Hamlet of the Ghostly apparition; he vows to watch with them that night and speak to it.

### Analysis

King Claudius and his new bride worry over Hamlet’s odd behavior; Gertrude correctly guesses that he is upset over his father’s death and their “o’erhasty marriage” (II.ii.57), a surmise which suggests that the queen feels some twinge of guilt over her recent actions. The royal couple press Hamlet to stay in Denmark at court, and not return to his studies in Wittenberg. Claudius’s motives are, of course, ulterior: to spy on Hamlet in order to learn the true cause of his madness, again suggesting that Claudius has some cause to fear retribution from his nephew/son. Perhaps incredibly, Hamlet agrees to their request to remain, even before he vows to avenge his father’s death. Why he would stay in an environment he finds uncomfortable and distasteful is a puzzle, unless we assume filial obedience as his overriding motive. More likely, however, this turn of events is another instance of the inexorable workings of fate, bringing together all the “actors” in some cosmic drama, as later scenes will bear witness.

## Act I, Scene 3 Summary and Analysis

### New Character

Ophelia: daughter to Polonius; sister to Laertes

### Summary

Laertes meets Ophelia to say his farewells before returning to France. He warns her to beware of Hamlet’s trifling with her, and urges her to remain chaste. Ophelia agrees to heed his advice, while urging him to obey it as well. Polonius enters and counsels Laertes, who departs. Polonius also warns Ophelia of Hamlet’s

amorous intentions, and finally instructs her to avoid him altogether. She assents.

### **Analysis**

This scene presents tender, if somewhat humorous, dialogue between sister and brother, father and son, and father and daughter. Buried in the conversation, however, is the undercurrent of honesty vs. deceit, love vs. betrayal, reality vs. appearances—all themes which recur throughout the play. Both Laertes and Polonius show great solicitude for Ophelia's welfare, and she exhibits demure obedience to their advice, born of wider experience of the world than her own.

## **Act I, Scene 4 Summary and Analysis**

### **Summary**

Hamlet, Horatio, and Marcellus wait just after midnight to see the Ghost. It appears, and beckons to Hamlet, who follows it. Horatio and Marcellus go after them.

### **Analysis**

First Horatio, and now Hamlet, have been brought to verify the appearance and identity of the Ghost. Hamlet appears resolute as he follows the beckoning apparition, though the others advise against it. His courage and resolution in this short scene are in sharp contrast to his apparent attitude in later scenes as he struggles with the issue of revenge.

## **Act I, Scene 5 Summary and Analysis**

### **Summary**

The Ghost of his father tells Hamlet that he was murdered by poison poured into his ear by Claudius. The Ghost urges Hamlet to avenge him, but to leave judgment of his mother to heaven. As the Ghost leaves, Hamlet swears to remember his father. Hamlet refuses to divulge the conversation to Horatio and Marcellus when they appear, and the Ghost reappears, repeatedly crying for them to “Swear” not to tell what they have seen. Hamlet also instructs them not to reveal the truth if he appears to be acting “odd” later on, and they finally so swear. Hamlet laments his appointed role as avenger of so great a wrong.

### **Analysis**

That the Ghost swears the soldiers to secrecy puts an extra burden on Hamlet. His mission to avenge his father may require him to do things which will appear odd or, as it turns out, insane, to onlookers. But the men who could explain his behavior are sworn not to reveal its cause. Further, Hamlet is sworn to leave his mother's judgment to heaven. Thus, Hamlet is admonished against releasing anger at his mother, yet obliged to pursue revenge against Claudius in ways that may seem illogical and unwarranted. His resulting mental anguish seems inevitable.

## **Act II, Scene 1 Summary and Analysis**

### **New Character**

Reynaldo: Polonius's servant

### **Summary**

Polonius sends Reynaldo to Paris to spy on Laertes, instructing him to use delicate indirection to learn of Laertes's behavior from other “Dankers [who] are in Paris” (7). After Reynaldo leaves, Ophelia enters, distressed, and tells her father that Hamlet has just approached her with “his doublet all unbraced; / No hat upon his head; his stockings fouled, / Ungartered, and down-gyved to his ankle” (75-77). She says he “held

[her] hard” (84) by the wrist, studied her silently for several moments, sighed “piteous and profound” 91), and then left her. Polonius believes Hamlet is lovesick because Ophelia has shunned him, and modifies his earlier suspicion that Hamlet meant only to trifle with Ophelia. Polonius and Ophelia depart to inform Claudius of this news.

### **Analysis**

Scene 1 shows Ophelia to be a naive young girl who trusts her father’s judgment and is obedient to his will. Polonius’s tedious instructions to Reynaldo echo his earlier advice to both Ophelia and Laertes, and foreshadow his behavior in Scene 2. When Reynaldo asks why he is being sent to spy on Laertes, Polonius’s justification is so circuitous even he loses track of what he was saying: “What was I about to say? By the mass, I was about to say something! Where did I leave?” (49-50).

## **Act II, Scene 2 Summary and Analysis**

### **New Characters**

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern: longtime friends and former schoolmates of Hamlet

Voltemand and Cornelius: sent by Claudius as ambassadors to King of Norway

The Players: traveling actors hired to perform at the castle

### **Summary**

King Claudius and Queen Gertrude receive Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, childhood friends of Hamlet, who agree to visit him and seek the cause of Hamlet’s “transformation” (line 5). Polonius enters to announce the arrival of Voltemand and Cornelius from Norway, and to say that he believes he has found the “very cause of Hamlet’s lunacy” (line 49). However, he delays revealing the information until the ambassadors have been heard, although Claudius does “long to hear” of it. Voltemand and Cornelius report that the ailing King of Norway, having discovered that young Fortinbras intended to attack Denmark rather than Poland, has redirected Fortinbras’ aggression against Poland and now asks safe passage through Denmark for Norway’s armies. Claudius agrees to consider the request.

Finally, when Polonius begins his story, he is so discursive that Gertrude pleads, “More matter, with less art” (line 95). He then begins to read them the letter he took from Ophelia. Impatient, Gertrude interrupts with “Came this from Hamlet to her?” (line 113). But Polonius controls the pacing with, “Good madam, stay awhile. I will be faithful” (line 114). When Claudius asks how Ophelia has received Hamlet’s love, Polonius takes the opportunity to cite his own virtues as a watchful father, who prudently checked and advised his daughter. To Claudius’ query, “Do you think ’tis [love sickness]?”, Polonius confidently answers, “Hath there been such a time ... / That I have positively said, ‘Tis so,’ / When it proved otherwise? / ... I will find / Where truth is hid, though it were hid indeed / Within the center” (lines 153-159). He even stakes his career as advisor on it if he is wrong: “Let me be no assistant for a state / But keep a farm and carters” (lines 166-167).

Having given a very dramatic account of Hamlet’s love sickness, Polonius arranges that Claudius and he will eavesdrop on a contrived conversation between Ophelia and Hamlet to prove his suspicions. The royal pair exit quickly as Hamlet enters, reading a book.

Polonius and Hamlet have a brief conversation full of non sequiturs and punned insults, which confirms Polonius’ opinion regarding the prince’s madness. The old man leaves when Rosencrantz and Guildenstern enter. Hamlet suggests that in coming to Denmark they have come to a prison, and finally gets them to admit that they have been “sent for.” He even guesses their assignment: to discover why he has “of late ... lost all

[his] mirth ... ” so that “Man delights [him not], nor woman neither” (lines 299-300, 313). The pair tell Hamlet that they have persuaded a traveling company of tragedians to perform for the court. As the players enter, Hamlet confides to his friends that he is only feigning his madness, despite what his “uncle-father and aunt-mother” believe: “I am but mad north-northwest: when the wind is southerly I know a hawk from a handsaw” (lines 381-382).

Polonius enters to announce the arrival of the players, whom Hamlet warmly welcomes. After he has one of the players recite a section from Aeneas’ tale to Dido detailing Pyrrhus’ murder of Priam, Hamlet secretly asks the actor if the players could present *The Murder of Gonzago* the next night, including a short insert “of some dozen or sixteen lines” which Hamlet will provide (line 543). The actor agrees.

When all have left, Hamlet contrasts his own seeming lack of passion in avenging his father’s death to the actor’s impassioned performance for imaginary characters the player does not even know. Hamlet resolves to test whether his father’s Ghost is a devil sent to damn him by staging a play which presents a murder similar to his father’s. Claudius’ reaction to the scenes will reveal whether or not he is guilty.

### **Analysis**

The lengthy second scene slows the lively pace which was characteristic of Act I, which had five fairly brief scenes, followed by the brisk first scene of Act II. This slowdown allows Shakespeare to establish beyond doubt that Claudius is guilty of the King’s murder, and to begin to explore Hamlet’s tortured mental state, caught between love, grief, and vengeance. The loyalty of Hamlet’s friends, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, is turned against him by his parents; yet, when Hamlet presses them, they give up the charade and admit their mission. They have even arranged the theatrical interlude because they know Hamlet was “wont to take ... delight in” their performances (II. ii. 331). Their obvious affection for Hamlet creates a problem for the reader when, in Act V, Scene 2, Hamlet reveals that he has forged the letters which will result in their deaths. He will justify his actions, saying essentially that his friends got caught in the middle, between him and Claudius; that their “own insinuation” (meddling) has brought about their defeat.

The conversation about the established adult acting companies versus the increasingly popular child actors was not only topical for Shakespeare’s audiences, but is also dramatically integral to the intergenerational motif of the play: the youth rising up to supplant their elders. Furthermore, the motif of illusion vs. reality which pervades the play is reinforced here with the several mentions of young boys playing the parts of women, also a timely reference. In addition, the suggestion that women are weaker or otherwise inferior is a recurrent motif: “frailty, thy name is woman—” (I. ii. 146); “O most pernicious woman!” (I. v. 105); “... it is such a kind of gain-giving as would perhaps trouble a woman” (V. ii. 216-217).

Voltemand and Cornelius bring news of Norway’s curbing of Fortinbras’ revenge aimed at Denmark, reinforcing another of the recurring motifs in this play: parents vs. children, and its flipside, children (sons, in this case) seeking to avenge their fathers’ deaths. Fortinbras’ father had lost his lands to Hamlet’s father in the recent war, and young Fortinbras plans to regain them by attack. His uncle, now King of Norway, intercedes and sets him against Poland. Hamlet and Fortinbras are both dispossessed heirs to the throne; in Act V, Scene 2, Hamlet will give his “dying voice” to Fortinbras’ accession to the throne of Denmark, and Fortinbras will eulogize Hamlet as “a soldier” and “most royal.” Thus, out of the chaos, we are assured order will be restored, and power passed into capable and worthy hands.

Hamlet’s inane conversations with both Polonius and with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are riddled with vulgar innuendoes, which foreshadows his scenes with Ophelia and Gertrude. The discrepancy between outer appearances and inner qualities is thus manifested once again; Hamlet even states this theme directly in his conversation with Gertrude in Act III, Scene 4, when he tells her that her trespass “will but skin and film the ulcerous place / Whiles rank corruption, mining all within, / Infects unseen” (lines 147-149). That Hamlet’s madness is merely pretense in Act II, Scene 2, is suggested by his remark as Polonius departs (“These tedious

old fools!’) and by his disclosure that his parents are “deceived” about his madness (lines 221, 379).

When Polonius announces the arrival of the players, Hamlet remarks to Guildenstern and Rosencrantz “That great baby you see there is not yet out of his swaddling clouts”; to which Rosencrantz counters, “... they say an old man is twice a child” (II. ii. 385-386, 388). Clearly Hamlet does not respect Polonius, despite his politically important position. Throughout the play, Polonius appears as arrogant, foolish, self-important, and unaware that others find him amusing, if not tedious. In proclaiming his own skills as an advisor and father, he has apparently forgotten that he was earlier forced to admit his change of mind, abandoning his assumption that Hamlet meant to trifle with Ophelia: “I am sorry that with better heed and judgment / I had not quoted him ... / By heaven, it is as proper to our age / To cast beyond ourselves in our opinions / As it is common for the younger sort / To lack discretion” (II. i. 111-117).

Hamlet continues to bait the king’s advisor with allusions to Jephtha, a Biblical king who sacrificed his daughter, implying a parallel to Polonius’ “loosing” Ophelia to Hamlet to verify his madness. That Hamlet understands the motives of those around him to be duplicitous is becoming increasingly clear, and that Hamlet’s madness is merely pretense, increasingly certain. If he is not mad, we may perhaps assume that his actions—and his inaction—are conscious and calculated.

Many critics have argued the issue of Hamlet’s inaction—that is, his delay in avenging his father’s death. The prince frequently laments his procrastination, contrasting himself to Fortinbras (who must be restrained from his planned vengeance for his father’s death) and to Pyrrhus (who takes sporting delight in “mincing” Priam—merely the father of Paris, the actual murderer of Pyrrhus’ father, Achilles). What is it that holds Hamlet back? Probably no one theory will encompass the body of evidence to be found in the entire work, but several major interpretations have been supported over the centuries by critics.

It is possible that Hamlet really had no opportunity to kill Claudius, with the exception of the time he found him at prayer in Act III, Scene 3. Not wishing to kill Claudius when the king’s soul and conscience were clear, Hamlet delays. Ironically, Claudius reveals that although he has prayed, “Words without thoughts never to heaven go” (III. iii. 99). Hamlet could have damned Claudius, had the prince only carried out his impulse.

In Act III, Scene 1, Hamlet himself suggests another of the popular theories: his “native hue of resolution / Is sicklied o’er with the pale cast of thought” (lines 84-85). In other words, he is not able to carry out the deeds which he has resolved to do, mired in his own “analysis paralysis.” In Act II, Scene 2, Hamlet suggests that Denmark is a prison, and compares it to his mind: “... there is nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it so” (lines 252-254). This passage also supports the theory of action arrested by intellect.

The question of Hamlet’s inaction is further complicated by the attitudes evidenced by several characters. In Act 3, Scene 2, The Player King tells the Player Queen that when her passions (i.e., her grief and loyalty) have cooled, her actions will be governed by other concerns and she will remarry. In Act 3, Scene 4, Hamlet chides Gertrude about her hasty remarriage, saying because of her age, she cannot have been ruled by her passions (i.e., lust), and must have been ruled by “judgment” (i.e., reason). The Ghost restrains Hamlet’s rebuke of Gertrude, urging him to channel his anger at Claudius; in other words, to control his passions as he seeks vengeance. And when Hamlet pays tribute to his loyal friend Horatio in Act III, Scene 2, he remarks that Horatio is not “passion’s slave” and whose “blood [passion] and judgment” is so well blended that he is not vulnerable to Fortune’s “buffets and rewards” (lines 68-73). For Hamlet, the dilemma is the proper yoking of passion, which would spur him to immediate vengeance, with reason, which is God-given, and which would temper Hamlet’s actions with prudent judgment. Hamlet seems unable to strike the balance, and is forever trying to weigh the emotional against the rational. The result is his inaction.

Hamlet has been dubbed the Melancholy Dane because of the many expressions of his sense of loss and grief at his father’s death. Elizabethans were familiar with the concept of *melancholia*, believed to be caused by an

excess of the humour (bodily fluid), black bile. The sufferer's moods would swing from deep depression and self-deprecation, to highly emotional outbursts. Certainly Hamlet's puzzling behavior, which appears insane to others, could be a manifestation of this supposed disorder.

More modern critics note the Oedipal pattern in Hamlet's relationship with his mother. To the extent that Claudius has done that which Hamlet himself desired to do (kill his father and marry his mother), the personae of Claudius and Hamlet merge. To avenge the murder-marriage is to commit suicide; indeed, Hamlet contemplates that very thing in his famous "To be or not to be" speech. Perhaps Hamlet hesitates to kill Claudius because of religious strictures against suicide, rather than against murder.

Other critics believe that Hamlet fears the apparition of his father is not an "honest Ghost," and that his uncertainty restrains his vengeance. If the Ghost is "a devil ... [in] a pleasing shape" who "abuses [Hamlet] to damn [him]," then to take matters into his own hands would go against Hamlet's religious beliefs (II. ii. 604-605, 608). Beliefs of the time held that royalty ruled by divine right, so the murder of Hamlet's father would therefore call for divine justice. If Hamlet is merely God's tool, the murder is divinely ordained and sanctioned. However, if the Ghost is not heaven sent, if Hamlet seeks revenge for his own purposes, the murder is not holy and Hamlet's revenge against Claudius would be a sin. As he says, "I'll have grounds / More relative than this" (II. ii. 608-609); he will let Claudius' reaction to the "mousetrap" guide him, rather than depending solely on the Ghost's injunction.

A very generous critical reading credits Hamlet with an awareness of his own selfish motives; murdering Claudius would clear the path to his own kingship. In Act 5, Scen 2, Hamlet suggests this thinking as he explains his cause to Horatio, noting that Claudius "Popped in between th' election and my hopes ... " (line 65). He delays throughout the play, these critics say, because he wants to make sure that he is truly avenging his father, not merely seeking his own advancement.

Each of these major theories can be supported with textual evidence, some more strongly than others. Hamlet's obvious intellect and education might persuade the reader that he is less a victim of circumstances and more a creature tormented by his ability to see the situation from many angles, fraught with consequences political and spiritual, public and personal.

Hamlet's plan to have the players enact *The Murder of Gonzago* with the addition of "some dozen or sixteen lines which [he] would set down" is another example of the use of indirection to learn the truth. Of course, the players themselves embody this principle of "acting" or pretending, engaging in "seeming" rather than in "being." Hamlet alludes to this ironic duplicity when he notes the actor's ability to "drown the stage with [real] tears / And cleave the general ear with horrid speech" (II. ii. 565-566) over an imagined murder, while he himself, "the son of a dear father murdered" (II. ii. 588), can only manage to curse his own inaction "like John-a-dreams" (II. ii. 572).

If we think of the players as actors—those who do, who perform, who carry out resolve—Hamlet's invidious comparison of the player's performance to his own, further reinforces his disgust at his own delay and inaction in carrying out the Ghost's charge to avenge his father's death. For instance, at Ophelia's graveside, Hamlet insists that he loved her more than "forty thousand brothers" (V. i. 279) but later tells Horatio that "the bravery of [Laertes'] grief" (V. ii. 79) made him forget himself, "For by the image of my cause I see / The portraiture of his" (V. ii. 77-78).

## Act III, Scene 1 Summary and Analysis

### Summary

In the presence of Polonius and Ophelia, King Claudius and Queen Gertrude question Rosencrantz and

Guildestern about their recent conversation with Hamlet; the pair report that although Hamlet confessed to being “distracted,” he would not reveal the cause, evading questioning with “a crafty madness.”

Hamlet’s friends also report that Hamlet was pleased to learn of the visit of the traveling players, and that he has arranged a performance for that night, to which he has invited the King and Queen. The two men leave, and Claudius instructs Gertrude to leave also so as not to encounter Hamlet, for whom he has secretly sent, “That he, as ‘twere by accident, may here / Affront Ophelia.” Gertrude obeys, confiding to Ophelia her hope that Hamlet’s love for Ophelia is the cause of his “wildness,” and that her “virtues / Will bring him to his wonted way again. . . .” Claudius and Polonius instruct Ophelia to pretend to be reading a book of devotions so that Hamlet will find her solitude plausible. They depart just as Hamlet enters.

The Prince speaks to himself regarding the relative merits of life and death, “To be, or not to be.” He weighs the troubles of living against the unknown nature of death and the afterlife. He compares death to sleep, sleep which is full of dreams which “must give us pause.” When he notices Ophelia at her devotions, he asks her to pray for his sins. She tells Hamlet that she wishes to return some “remembrances” of his, but he denies that he gave her anything. She protests that he did give them, along with “words of sweet breath,” which he also denies.

Hamlet then urges Ophelia to “Get thee to a nunnery,” that all men are “arrant knaves,” not to be believed. He then decries marriage in general, and says that “Those that are married already—all but one—shall live. The rest shall keep as they are.” He exits, leaving Ophelia to lament his apparent insanity.

Polonius and Claudius emerge from their concealment. Claudius notes that Hamlet’s words did not sound either like love or like madness, and announces that he will send Hamlet to England to collect overdue tribute. He hopes the change of scenery and the ocean voyage will get rid of the “something in his soul” which is bothering Hamlet. Polonius agrees to the King’s plan, but urges one more attempt to discover the cause of Hamlet’s “grief.” After the play, Gertrude is to sound him out, and Polonius plans to eavesdrop. If this plan does not work, Polonius tells Claudius to send Hamlet to England, “or confine him where / Your wisdom best shall think.” Claudius agrees, and says the “Madness in great ones must not unwatched go.” They exit.

### **Analysis**

This act begins with a stage crowded with those characters most closely associated with Hamlet, with the exception of Horatio and Laertes: Claudius, Gertrude, Polonius, Ophelia, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. As each one is assigned his task in the discovery of Hamlet’s malaise, that character departs. When at last the stage is empty but for Ophelia, Hamlet enters.

Every character is involved in duplicity at this point: Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are not being completely honest with Claudius, as they were not completely honest with Hamlet; Gertrude disappears so Hamlet does not suspect that he is being set up; Claudius and Polonius conceal themselves so they can eavesdrop; and Ophelia pretends to be in maidenly devotions in order to engage Hamlet in conversation.

Hamlet, meantime, has conceived of the Mousetrap in order to trick Claudius into exposing his guilt. The Prince then proceeds to lie to Ophelia, denying that he gave her “remembrances” or that he spoke lovingly to her; she is convinced he is insane. At Polonius’ suggestion, Claudius continues his deceit with the plot to ship Hamlet to England with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, supposedly to collect overdue tribute.

Even after overhearing Hamlet’s interlude with Ophelia, Polonius urges one final attempt to discern the cause of Hamlet’s mental state: the scene in Gertrude’s closet which, ironically, causes his own death. Polonius is not only overbearing and pompous, self-important and self-righteous; he is bent on orchestrating every step of every dance. It is his job to give counsel to the King; but he insists on giving advice to everyone: his son, his daughter, Hamlet, the Queen, Reynaldo; he even admits to having played Julius Caesar in the university, “and

was accounted a good actor”—presumably he would advise the Players, if called upon.

Hamlet’s remarks to Ophelia about marriage are worth noting. He says that all men are “arrant knaves,” which is certainly the case in Claudius’ court, as we have seen. But he also decrees that everyone who is presently married shall live, but one; and the rest “shall keep as they are,” presumably unwed. Remember that Claudius and Polonius are eavesdropping; Claudius hears this “all but one.” Surely he senses Hamlet’s intent, for a few moments later, Claudius announces his plan to send Hamlet to England. As Claudius later reveals to the pair, this move is more for his own protection than for Hamlet’s well-being.

Once again Polonius lays his heavy hand on the details, urging the King to either send Hamlet to England “or confine him where / Your wisdom best shall think.” Polonius seems unconcerned whether Hamlet is a threat to his daughter’s virtue or to Claudius’ reign; Polonius sees an opportunity to exercise control and influence, and takes it—again and again.

## Act III, Scene 2 Summary and Analysis

### Summary

Hamlet enters, giving instructions to several of the Players on the appropriate and most effective delivery of the “speech” which he has prepared for insertion into the evening’s performance. As the Players exit, Polonius enters with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, who inform Hamlet that Claudius and Gertrude have agreed to attend the play. Hamlet urges the trio to go help hasten the Players, then summons Horatio. Hamlet expresses his love and respect for Horatio, then asks Horatio to scrutinize Claudius during the one scene which “comes near the circumstance . . . of my father’s death.” Horatio agrees.

Gertrude invites her son to sit beside her, but he refuses in favor of a seat with Ophelia, whom he engages in risqué banter. The dumb show (pantomime) begins, enacting the murder of a King by one who pours poison in his ears; the widowed Queen at first appears disconsolate, but eventually accepts the love of the man who murdered her husband. Hamlet assures Ophelia that the actors will explain the meaning of the dumb show.

Following a brief Prologue, the Player King and Player Queen speak of love, death, and remarriage. The Player King and Queen discuss the likelihood of her remarriage after his impending death; she vows she will not, but he argues that when we make decisions in the heat of the moment, we fail to carry them out when the emotion fades: “What to ourselves in passion we propose, The passion ending, doth the purpose lose.” The Player King also notes that fortune does not follow our desires; so “’tis not strange That even our loves should with our fortunes change.”

The Player Queen declares that she would rather starve, be imprisoned, be without trust, hope, and joy, and have “lasting strife, If, once a widow, ever I be wife!”, especially if the second husband had murdered the first. She says such a marriage would be for reasons of “thrift, but none of love,” but the Player King argues that “So think thou wilt no second husband wed, / But die thy thoughts when thy first lord is dead.”

When Claudius asks if this play is meant to give offense, Hamlet assures him “they do but jest, poison in jest; no offense i’ th’ world . . . we that have free souls, it touches us not.” But as the play progresses and the actor portraying Lucianus (the king’s nephew) pours poison in the sleeping king’s ear, Hamlet comments, “You shall see anon how the murderer gets the love of Gonzago’s wife.” Claudius bolts from his seat, Polonius ends the performance and calls for lights, and everyone leaves except Hamlet and Horatio. They believe they have exposed Claudius, proving the Ghost’s validity.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern enter, and urge Hamlet to obey his mother’s request that he come to her before he goes to bed. The pair attempt to persuade Hamlet to reveal the “cause of distemper,” but he evades



their questions and accuses them of trying to play upon him like the recorders the Players have just entered with: “Call me what instrument you will, though you can fret me, you cannot play upon me.” Polonius enters and repeats Gertrude’s request, which Hamlet says he will heed. When all others have departed, Hamlet resolves to hold his anger in check, rebuking his mother but not harming her.

### Analysis

The second scene also opens with a full stage as Hamlet addresses the Players about dramatic delivery; as the Players depart to make ready, Polonius enters with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Hamlet quickly moves that trio offstage to “hasten” the Players. Then Horatio enters, and he and Hamlet speak as dear and close friends. Horatio, who had earlier been enlisted by Claudius and Gertrude to sound out Hamlet, now sides with his long time friend and school mate—more duplicity.

This technique repeated from Scene 1, of many becoming few, stresses the increasing intensity of the machinations of the opposing forces: Claudius’ in the first, and Hamlet’s in the second. They mirror each other, but are inverse images: evil for good. But now the stage again fills to overflowing with the Players, the members of the royal court, the lords and ladies attendant thereon, and Guards with torches. Hamlet refuses his mother’s invitation to sit beside her, going instead to Ophelia and engaging in bawdy innuendoes.

Shakespeare has crowded the stage and placed Ophelia and Hamlet front and center with seemingly inappropriate and confusing dialogue. When Hamlet comments that his mother has remarried not “*two hours*” after his father’s death, Ophelia remarks that it is “*twice two months*.” But when he restates the matter, he makes it only “*two months*.” Likewise, the Players were originally scheduled to perform “tomorrow night;” but moments later, they are hurrying to make ready for the performance “presently” that very night. This seeming confusion over chronology is really Shakespeare’s way of telescoping time, lending urgency to the matter at hand—Hamlet’s revenge on the murderer of his father.

As the dumb show concludes, Ophelia asks Hamlet what it means; he answers “mischief,” referring to his plan to expose Claudius. The Prologue does not satisfy Ophelia’s curiosity, and she notes that “’Tis brief, my lord.” Hamlet answers, “As woman’s love,” returning to his theme of his mother’s infidelity to her dead husband’s memory. Hamlet, pursuing his “mischief,” asks his mother, “how like you this play?” Gertrude answers, “The lady doth protest too much, methinks,” suggesting that from her perspective, remarriage would not be an impossibility for a widow. Hamlet replies, “O, but she’ll keep her word,” implying that the Player Queen, at least, is faithful to her vows—an invidious comparison that surely is not lost on Gertrude.

Guildenstern and Rosencrantz, sent to summon Hamlet to his mother’s room, reveal that Claudius is “in . . . marvelous [distemper],” not from drink, as Hamlet suggests, but from “choler” (anger). Hamlet’s suggestion that they should rather be summoning a doctor to purge the king and make him well is a foreshadowing of the imagery he will use when he finds Claudius at prayer: “This physic but prolongs thy sickly days.” When Rosencrantz and Guildenstern report back to Claudius a few moments later, they speak of the necessity of protecting the king’s health against any harm that may be intended by Hamlet. Their remarks make clear that the life of “majesty,” upon whom so many other lives depend, is of far greater importance than an ordinary man’s life.

This conversation helps to justify Hamlet’s later action of sealing their death warrant; they have tried to “play upon [him]”, taking Claudius’ part against him. Hamlet explains to Horatio that he does not feel guilty for their fates; the pair simply got caught between the thrustings “of mighty opposites.” His pragmatic view ironically echoes their own attitude, that the life of the king is more important than any other’s; since Hamlet had hoped to become king (by election) at his father’s death, he is the “majesty” this time around, not Claudius.

## Act III, Scene 3 Summary and Analysis

### Summary

Claudius enters with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern; Claudius is convinced that Hamlet, in his “madness,” means to harm him in some way. He proposes to send Hamlet to England, along with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, for safety’s sake. They agree, noting that the fortunes of “Majesty” always affect the lives of many others besides itself. This voyage is to commence at once.

Polonius enters to inform Claudius that Hamlet is on his way to Gertrude’s private room; Polonius announces that he will hide “behind the arras,” in order to “o’erhear” their conversation. Polonius says he expects Gertrude to severely scold Hamlet, but notes that, as Hamlet’s mother, she will be biased toward anything he may say to her. Thus, “’Tis meet that some more audience than a mother” should hear Hamlet’s remarks. Polonius promises Claudius that he will return with a full report before the king goes to bed.

Claudius then soliloquizes about his guilt over the murder of his own brother, which he compares to the murder of Abel by Cain. Claudius laments the fact that he is unable to pray and thus receive mercy, which would cleanse him of this sin. He suspects that his offense would not be forgiven, since he retains all the benefits deriving from the murder: “My crown, mine own ambition, and my queen.” Perhaps on earth one can “[Buy] out the law. But ’tis not so above.” At last, the king manages to kneel in a final attempt at repentance.

Hamlet enters, sees Claudius apparently at prayer, and reasons that to murder Claudius now would “send [this same villain] To heaven” rather than to hell. He vows to wait and kill Claudius—as Claudius had killed Hamlet’s father—“full of bread, / With all his crimes broad blown, as flush as May,” while the king is “about some act / That has no relish of salvation in’t—. . . .” Hamlet notes that Claudius’ prayer has only postponed his eventual death.

Ironically, as Hamlet exits, Claudius rises, and discloses that he has still been unable to pray and receive the spiritual peace he seeks: “My words fly up, my thoughts remain below. Words without thoughts never to heaven go.”

### Analysis

Prominently foregrounded in this scene is Claudius’ guilt and the fear which attends it. He imagines—rightly so—that Hamlet means to harm him. And he feels the need to repent before heaven in order to escape eternal damnation. Thus Claudius fears both earthly and divine retribution, and in this scene both are postponed. Hamlet waits until a more suitable time to kill the king, and Claudius finds himself unable to pray with satisfactory results.

The importance given to Claudius’ life, as “majesty,” is ironic; for Claudius has murdered his brother—also “majesty”—and Hamlet, likely to be elected “majesty,” is on Claudius’ trail. The question of whose life is most important in the grand scheme of things is therefore moot, since the former King, Claudius, and Hamlet all have a claim to that coveted seat.

## Act III, Scene 4 Summary and Analysis

### Summary

Polonius urges the Queen to be sharply critical of Hamlet’s actions, and to tell him that she has had to intercede on his behalf, standing “between / Much heat and him.” Polonius then hides behind the wall tapestry as Hamlet enters. Hamlet speaks very directly to his mother, telling her that she has offended his father, and proposes revealing her “innermost part” to her. Gertrude cries out in fear that Hamlet means to

murder her, prompting Polonius to call out from behind the curtain. Hamlet, supposing the eavesdropper to be Claudius, thrusts his sword through the curtain, killing Polonius, over whom Hamlet says, “Thou wretched, rash, intruding fool, farewell! I took thee for thy better.” Hamlet scolds the old man for being “too busy,” thus endangering his own life. Hamlet then insists that his mother sit down and hear him out; she continues to berate him for his rudeness and claims not to know what act or deed of hers he speaks of “that roars so loud and thunders. . . .”

Hamlet produces two images, one of his father, the other of his uncle. He contrasts them for Gertrude, expressing his disbelief that she could have so soon forgotten her first husband, on whom “every god did seem to set his seal / To give the world assurance of a man.” He reasons that she cannot have been driven by passion, “for at [her] age / The heyday in the blood is tame, . . . And waits upon the judgment, and what judgment / Would step from this to this?” He finally declares that virtue melts and all shame disappears when passion rules over reason.

Gertrude begs Hamlet to stop, for she now sees her guilt; but he continues to recount her sin of incest with “A murderer and a villain, / A slave that is not twentieth part the tithes / Of your precedent lord, a vice of kings, / A cutpurse of the empire and the rule, . . .” Then the Ghost enters, visible only to Hamlet, who asks if his father has come to scold him for not yet carrying out his revenge. The Ghost directs Hamlet to comfort his mother, who is very disturbed by Hamlet’s words and by his speaking to “th’ incorporal air.”

Gertrude is certain that Hamlet is mad, but he urges her to realize that it is not his madness but “[her] trespass” that speaks. He begs her to “Confess [herself] to heaven, / Repent what’s past, avoid what is to come. . . .” He asks her to refrain from sleeping with Claudius that night, “And that shall lend a kind of easiness / To the next abstinence. . . .” Further, Hamlet tells her not to reveal to Claudius that he is not really mad, and she agrees. He reminds her that he is scheduled to sail to England with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, whom he does not trust anymore than “adders fanged.” But he tells his mother that he plans to outsmart them.

Hamlet then drags Polonius out of the room, calling his body “the guts.” He notes that while alive, Polonius was “a foolish, prating knave,” but that he is now “most still, most secret, and most grave. . . .”

### **Analysis**

Hamlet continues with imagery of health and disease in his conversation with Gertrude. He insists that he is healthy, not mad. He pleads with her to recognize that her “trespass” “will but skin and film the ulcerous place Whiles rank corruption, [under]mining all within, Infects unseen.” This image also echoes the play’s persistent motif of appearance vs. reality, seeming vs. being, deception vs. honesty.

## **Act IV, Scene 1 Summary and Analysis**

### **Summary**

Claudius, Gertrude, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern enter; Claudius remarks on Gertrude’s sighing, which he asks her to explain. She dismisses the two young men, and then relates to Claudius the recent events in her closet; she says Hamlet, “in his lawless fit,” has killed Polonius. Claudius notes that he himself would have been killed, had he been the one hiding behind the curtain. He regrets that, out of love for Hamlet, he neglected to do what was best; that is, he “Should have kept short, restrained, and out of haunt / This mad young man,” but instead “let [him] feed / Even on the pith of life” like a disease kept unacknowledged.

Gertrude reveals that Hamlet, who has gone to remove Polonius’ body, “weeps for what is done,” which she says proves his madness is genuine. Claudius reminds Gertrude that he is shipping Hamlet out at daybreak, which must be made acceptable to the court. He summons Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and bids them hasten

to find Hamlet, “speak fair,” and bring Polonius’ body into the chapel. They leave, and Claudius advises Gertrude that they must tell their “wisest friends” what has happened to Polonius, and that they are sending Hamlet away. The King hopes, by coupling these two events, to throw all ill will toward Hamlet, avoiding any taint of slander himself. They exit, with Claudius “full of discord and dismay.”

### **Analysis**

Act IV begins with four relatively short scenes, presenting the King and Queen; then Hamlet with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern; then Rosencrantz, Guildenstern, Hamlet, and the King; then Hamlet, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern with the Captain of Fortinbras’ army. Shakespeare is speeding up the action in these brief scenes, quickening the pace as Claudius moves swiftly to protect himself from Hamlet, even as Hamlet baits him by playing hide-and-seek with Polonius’ body. When Hamlet and the others encounter Fortinbras, Hamlet desires to get on with his appointed task of avenging his father. Shakespeare thus continues the sense of building urgency in this act.

## **Act IV, Scene 2 Summary and Analysis**

### **Summary**

Hamlet enters, having “Safely stowed” the body of Polonius. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern enter, seeking the corpse, but Hamlet won’t tell where it is hidden, saying only he has “Compounded it with dust, whereto ’tis kin.” Then Hamlet calls Rosencrantz a “sponge . . . that soaks up the King’s countenance, his rewards, his authorities.” But that when the King needs what they “have gleaned, it is but squeezing you and, sponge, you shall be dry again.” When they ask again of the body’s whereabouts, Hamlet again refuses to say, but agrees to go with them to the King, whom Hamlet says is “a thing . . . Of nothing.” Hamlet dashes offstage as if they are pursuing him in a game of hide-and-seek: “Hide fox, and all after.”

### **Analysis**

True to her word to Hamlet, Gertrude is at great pains to assure Claudius that Hamlet’s madness is genuine. She even stretches the truth by saying Hamlet “weeps for what is done”—Hamlet repents, but says “heaven hath pleased it so, . . . That I must be their scourge and minister.” Claudius is at equally great pains to convince Gertrude that he is acting in Hamlet’s best interest in shipping him off to England. Claudius plans to manipulate the public disclosure of information to his best advantage. Similarly he will attempt to manipulate England’s allegiance in arranging Hamlet’s murder (Scene 3), and to manipulate Laertes’ anger by excusing his own inaction out of love for Gertrude and public sentiment for Hamlet (Scene 7).

## **Act IV, Scene 3 Summary and Analysis**

### **Summary**

Claudius enters with several men, whom he has told of Hamlet’s murder of Polonius, and that he has “sent to seek him and to find the body.” He tells them it is dangerous to allow Hamlet to remain at large, but that because of Hamlet’s popularity among the “distracted multitude,” his punishment must not seem too heavy; the public only judge what they can see, and weigh only the punishment, “But never the offense.” Claudius says Hamlet’s sudden leaving must seem to be part of a careful plan in order to keep things “all smooth and even.”

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern enter and report that Hamlet will not reveal the location of Polonius’ body, and that Hamlet is waiting outside. Claudius summons him, but Hamlet will only tell the King, first, that Polonius is “At supper,” where he is being eaten by worms; and second, that Polonius is in heaven, or perhaps in hell. But finally he reveals that Polonius can be found “as you go up the stairs into the lobby” where he “will stay till you come.”

The King tells Hamlet that, for his own safety, he is being sent to England at once. Hamlet then bids the King farewell, calling him “dear Mother,” since “father and mother is man and wife, man and wife is one flesh, and so, my mother.” Hamlet exits, and Claudius orders the others to follow him and get him on board ship without delay, since everything that depends on this aspect of his plan is all “sealed and done.”

Left alone, Claudius expresses his hope that England will obey the letters that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern carry which call for Hamlet’s “present death.” He notes that England is still in awe of Denmark because of past defeats, and he hopes that this fear will insure their cooperation. He says that Hamlet is like a fever in his blood which must be cured, or Claudius can not have happiness, no matter what else may befall him.

### **Analysis**

Although Claudius is trying desperately to orchestrate the events to Hamlet’s disadvantage, Hamlet remains in control despite his seeming madness. All Claudius and the others can do is react to Hamlet’s inane remarks and puzzling actions. Claudius is struggling both at home and abroad—in England—to rally public opinion and political power into his own camp.

## **Act IV, Scene 4 Summary and Analysis**

### **New Characters**

Young Fortinbras: nephew to the aged king of Norway

Captain: officer in Fortinbras’ army

### **Summary**

Fortinbras sends his Captain to Claudius, seeking escort for his army’s safe march through Denmark. He says if the King wishes, he will meet personally with him. Fortinbras exits with his army. Hamlet and Rosencrantz enter and learn from the Captain that the army, headed for “some part of Poland,” means to attack a “little patch of ground that hath in it no profit but the name,” not worth “five ducats.” Hamlet doubts the Poles will defend such a worthless area, but the Captain tells him “it is already garrisoned.” Hamlet comments that “Two thousand souls and twenty thousand ducats” is a high price to pay for something so worthless, and notes that this sort of behavior results from “much wealth and peace,” destroying from within like an abscess.

Left alone, having sent his companions on ahead, Hamlet notes that events are conspiring to spur his revenge. He says a man who only eats and sleeps is but a beast; surely God gave us reason. He wonders why he does not act on his thoughts, since he has “cause, and will, and strength, and means To do’t.” Hamlet says that even young Fortinbras, “a delicate and tender prince,” takes great risk for little gain, “When honor’s at the stake.” Hamlet notes his own great motivations (“a father killed, a mother stained”) do not move him to action, while Fortinbras’ army is about to engage in a battle in which more men will be killed than the worthless land they fight for can hold in burial. He vows to have only “bloody” thoughts from now on.

### **Analysis**

In Scene 4, Hamlet is moved to note his own delay and inaction in seeking revenge, as contrasted with the willingness of Fortinbras’ and the Polish armies to fight and die for nothing more than honor. Their battlefield is nearly worthless, but he has great motive: “a father killed, a mother stained.”

## **Act IV, Scene 5 Summary and Analysis**

### **Summary**

Horatio, Gertrude, and a Gentleman enter. At Horatio’s urging, the Queen finally agrees to speak with Ophelia, who the Gentleman reports to be in a distracted, pitiable state, babbling nonsense about her dead

father. Ophelia enters singing of a dead man, and a maid deflowered. Claudius enters, and seeing her state, orders Horatio to “Follow her close; give her good watch.” Alone with Gertrude, Claudius relays all the bad news from court: Polonius’ murder and hasty burial, Hamlet’s “remove” to England, public unrest at Polonius’ death, Ophelia’s madness, and Laertes’ secret return from France and his suspicions that Claudius is somehow responsible for Polonius’ death. Claudius says all these events are killing him, like shrapnel from a cannon, “in many places.”

A Messenger enters with news that Laertes has overtaken the King’s officers, and is now being hailed as the “rabble’s” choice for king. Gertrude laments that the “false Danish dogs” are on the wrong trail. Laertes bursts in upon the King and Queen, insists that those accompanying him wait outside, and angrily demands to know the whereabouts of his father. Gertrude attempts to restrain Laertes from accusing or harming Claudius, but Claudius declares that, as King, he is divinely protected from treason, and humors Laertes’ wrath. Claudius assures Laertes that he had nothing to do with Polonius’ death, and that he grieves deeply for his demise.

Ophelia enters, singing of her father’s death and distributing imaginary flowers, apparently quite mad and unresponsive to Laertes’ comments to her. Laertes is touched by her state and moved to revenge. When Ophelia leaves, Claudius implores Laertes to hear him out in the presence of whichever of Laertes’ friends the young man would select, “to judge ‘twixt you and me.” Claudius vows to relinquish everything, including his life, to Laertes if he is found responsible for Polonius’ death. They depart to discuss Polonius’ “means of death” and his improper, unceremonious burial.

### **Analysis**

Scene 5 presents yet another contrast to Hamlet’s delay; Laertes bursts in upon the King and Queen and demands to know about his father’s death. Gertrude, in her accustomed role as peacemaker and restrainer-of-violent-men, tries to soothe Laertes’ wrath over his father’s death and his sister’s madness; and Claudius, in his usual self-serving half-truth declaration, swears to forfeit everything if he is directly or indirectly responsible for Polonius’ death. That the “rabble” have proclaimed Laertes their choice for King makes it doubly important that Claudius keep Laertes from harboring any animosity toward him. To have murdered the king, only to be impeached by the fickle populace, would make Claudius’ sins weigh heavily indeed.

Ophelia presents perhaps the furthest end of a spectrum on which sit also Hamlet, Laertes, and young Fortinbras. In the face of her father’s death, she goes crazy. Perhaps Shakespeare makes a gender distinction here, as Laertes (Scene 7) forbids his tears on hearing of Ophelia’s death, but says when he is alone, “The woman will be out.” Woman, as weaker or gentler, cannot bear the heavy burden as well as man; Ophelia loses that capacity (reason) which Hamlet notes several times in the play is what separates us from beasts. Hamlet’s madness is, while convincing to many who witness it, completely feigned. He is admittedly tormented by his conflicting desires and fears, but he is not crazy. He needs constant prompting in his vengeance, and continually berates himself for his weak resolve.

On the other hand, Laertes acts promptly at the news of his slain father, seeking the villain even in the King’s chambers; but he is easily turned aside and manipulated by Claudius, who turns him into a tool against Hamlet—Laertes’ friend and Claudius’ enemy. And Fortinbras, after a false start to attack Denmark, whose former king slew his father, is redirected against Poland in a battle over land not worth dying for, purely for principle and honor. Not one of these children really achieves a satisfactory resolution in the search for vengeance.

## Act IV, Scene 6 Summary and Analysis

### New Characters

Sailors: seafaring men who bring news from Hamlet

### Summary

Horatio and a few others are accosted by Sailors with a letter from Hamlet to Horatio, detailing his capture at sea by pirates, who, he says, treated him well. The letter instructs Horatio to deliver the “letters I have sent” to the King, and then come at once to him, guided by “these good fellows.” Hamlet adds that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern still sail toward England, and says “Of them I have much to tell thee.”

Horatio promises to reward the Sailors for delivering the messages.

### Analysis

The unlikely capture-rescue of Hamlet by the pirates is, of course, dramatically necessary to effect Hamlet’s return to Denmark, but it strains plausibility even more than the turn of events in the final sword fight (Act V, Scene 2). The interface between possibility and plausibility is stretched taut. This unlikely series of events, however, does reinforce Hamlet’s frequent remarks about the role of fate in men’s lives.

Hamlet’s use of the phrase, “compelled valor,” echoes his rebuke to his mother in Act III, Scene 4: “Assume a virtue, if you have it not.” As Hamlet feigned bravery in boarding the pirate ship, Gertrude was urged to feign virtue in absenting herself from Claudius’ bed. The motif of illusion versus reality, seeming versus being, play acting versus genuine, is again foregrounded.

## Act IV, Scene 7 Summary and Analysis

### Summary

Laertes asks Claudius why, as King, he did not act against Hamlet, whom Claudius accuses of “[pursuing] my life.” Claudius cites two reasons. First, his own love for Gertrude, whose love for Hamlet is so great that he cannot counteract it. Second, the love the general public has for Hamlet makes it impossible for them to see Hamlet’s faults; they would tend to turn Claudius’ accusations back upon himself. Claudius tries to assure Laertes that they are united in their love of Polonius and in their desire for revenge against Hamlet for his plottings.

A Messenger enters with letters from Hamlet, for Claudius and for Gertrude. Hamlet tells the King that he has landed “naked [without any means or provisions] on your kingdom,” and asks to see Claudius the next day, at which time he will “recount the occasion of my sudden and more strange return.” The postscript adds, “alone.” Claudius enlists Laertes in a plot to kill Hamlet which is so foolproof that even Gertrude will “call it accident.” The King flatters Laertes’ skills as a fencer, and says Hamlet is so envious of Laertes’ reputation that he will accept a challenge to duel Laertes, especially if he believes that Claudius has wagered on the outcome. Laertes vows to poison his sword tip to insure Hamlet’s death if he be “but scratched withal.” As double insurance, Claudius promises to poison a drink, which Hamlet will call for “When in your motion you are hot and dry” toward the end of the bout.

Gertrude enters with news that Ophelia has drowned in the stream as she tried to hang flower garlands on the willow branches. Laertes withholds his tears as too womanly, and leaves in an agitated state. Claudius tells Gertrude that he had to work hard to calm Laertes, and now fears that “this will give it start again,” so they follow Laertes.

## **Analysis**

Claudius is again—or still—struggling to maintain control of the situation, but now it is Laertes who threatens to upset the King's plans. Claudius puts on a show of bravado in the face of Laertes' demands, and insinuates Laertes into his plot against Hamlet. Now Claudius openly intends to deceive Gertrude as he murders her son; previously he had deceived her covertly in the murder of her husband. That Claudius is ruthless as well as resolute becomes apparent when, at news of Ophelia's death, the King says they need to watch Laertes to keep him calm. His true motive, of course, is to protect his own position against Laertes, whom the people have proclaimed as their choice for king.

## **Act V, Scene 1 Summary and Analysis**

### **New Characters**

Two Clowns: rustics who are digging Ophelia's grave

Doctor of Divinity: priest who presides at Ophelia's burial

### **Summary**

The two rustics discuss the particulars of Ophelia's death and burial. The coroner has ruled that she shall have a Christian burial, which would mean that her death was accidental. But the men believe that Ophelia must have drowned herself, and suicide would prevent her from having a Christian burial. They decide that because she is a gentlewoman, she—like her class—is more privileged to drown or hang herself than are her fellow Christians. They make grisly jokes as they continue digging; then one sends the other to fetch him a tankard of beer. The one left digging sings about love and the brevity of life, as Hamlet and Horatio come upon him.

Horatio reasons that the man's exposure to these matters has hardened him to death. The Clown roughly throws out a number of skulls, to which Horatio and Hamlet assign identities such as politician, courtier, a Lord or Lady, lawyer, and buyer of land. When they inquire whose grave the Clown digs, he replies it is for a woman. The Clown reveals that he has been a gravedigger since Hamlet's father overcame old Fortinbras, the very day that young Hamlet was born. He answers Hamlet's further inquiries by noting that young Hamlet was sent to England because he was mad, and will return when he is better: "or, if 'a do not, 'tis no great matter there . . . There the men are as mad as he." The Clown identifies one skull as Yorick's, the King's jester, whom Hamlet says "hath borne me on his back a thousand times." They continue discussing mortality and the return of man, no matter how noble, to the dust from whence he came.

From some distance, Horatio and Hamlet see the King, Queen, Laertes, a Doctor of Divinity, and various Lords entering with a coffin. The priest tells Laertes that because of her "doubtful" death, Ophelia cannot have complete rites, such as "To sing a requiem," and must lie "in ground unsanctified . . . Till the last trumpet." Gertrude strews flowers over the body, saying she had hoped "[Ophelia's] bride bed to have decked," not her grave. Laertes leaps into the grave to hold his sister one last time before they cover her, and then asks that they bury him too.

At that, Hamlet comes forward to protest Laertes' actions: "I loved Ophelia. Forty thousand brothers / Could not with all their quantity of love / Make up my sum." The two men struggle, and are finally parted by Horatio and the attendants. Gertrude and Claudius assure Laertes that Hamlet's words and actions are "mere madness" which will soon pass. Horatio ushers Hamlet out, and Claudius urges Laertes to patiently await the working out of the plot of which they spoke earlier.

### **Analysis**

Just as Act I began and ended with the appearance of the Ghost, Act V begins with the graveyard scene and



ends with the multiple murders and imminent funeral rites. Throughout this final act are numerous references to death, as well as discussions of man's mortality. The rustics believe Ophelia, as a member of the gentility, to have special privilege in regard to her burial; but Hamlet and Horatio note that the unearthed skulls might belong to a person from any social class. Even Hamlet's once-beloved jester, Yorick, is sickening in his inevitable decomposition. That death and decay is the common end of all mankind underlies Hamlet's remarks to Horatio, where he notes that Alexander and Caesar could, in death, "stop a beer barrel" or "patch a wall."

This scene echoes Act IV in which Hamlet tells Claudius that Polonius is "At supper," meaning that he is now being eaten by maggots, and describes the food chain that enables "a king [to] go a progress through the guts of a beggar." Even the gravedigger sings of his youthful days of sweet love making, which have fallen victim to "age with his stealing steps," which "hath shipped me into the land, / As if I had never been such."

When the Clown reveals that he has been digging graves since the day of Hamlet's birth, the juxtaposition of death and birth cannot be ignored. Furthermore, the coincidence of the former King's victory over old Fortinbras on that same day lends a nobility to Hamlet by right of his royal birth. Yorick's skull, while part of the comic business, is another juxtaposition of youth (Hamlet's) with death (the jester's). This blending of the personal with the political is a motif upon which the revenge theme relies heavily throughout the play.

The hand of Fate is heavy, especially in this last act. Hamlet voices his belief that "There's a divinity that shapes our ends, Rough-hew them how we will." The series of coincidences which began with the accidental murder of Polonius in Act III continues with the incredibly easy exchange of death warrants for Guildenstern and Rosencrantz in place of his own, Hamlet's capture/rescue by the pirates, his unwillingness to postpone the fencing match with Laertes, his refusal of the poisoned cup until he finishes the bout, and the subsequent mistaken poisonings of Gertrude and Laertes. All of these events feed into the sense of inevitability and injustice, qualities which heighten the tragedy in this play, as they do in classical tragedy. That Hamlet's own weaknesses compound the external circumstances help define the play as Elizabethan, in which the protagonist's flawed nature conspires to bring the universe down upon him.

## Act V, Scene 2 Summary and Analysis

### Summary

Hamlet explains to Horatio how he managed to switch the letter which Rosencrantz and Guildenstern carried, ordering Hamlet's death, for one which ordered their own upon their arrival in England. Because of how smoothly this "changling" occurred, Hamlet expresses his belief that fate, or some "divinity," works out the details of our lives even when we have only a rough plan. Hamlet says that he feels no guilt for ordering the deaths of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, since they so eagerly pursued him under Claudius' direction. And is it not now incumbent upon him, Hamlet continues, to also pay back the King for his evil deeds? Hamlet expresses his regret that he lost his temper with Laertes, whose grief and cause mirrors his own; he vows to "court his favors," and adds that Laertes' bravado has spurred his own resolve.

Osric enters with an invitation from Claudius to engage in a fencing match with Laertes, whose excellent qualities and skills are discussed at some length and agreed upon by Hamlet, Horatio, and Osric. Osric says Claudius has wagered substantial goods that Hamlet can beat Laertes, the duel to begin immediately if Hamlet is willing. Hamlet sends Osric to Claudius with his consent; a Lord returns at once, asking if Hamlet will engage Laertes now or later.

The duel is immediately arranged, with the King and Queen set to attend; Gertrude sends word to Hamlet to be courteous to Laertes before they begin duelling. Horatio predicts that Hamlet will lose, but Hamlet says he has been practicing and feels confident, despite a sense of misgiving "as would perhaps trouble a woman."

Horatio says if Hamlet has any misgivings at all, he will postpone the match and say Hamlet is “not fit.” But Hamlet again expresses his belief in fate, and says “readiness is all;” whatever is meant to be will come sooner or later.

Claudius and Gertrude enter with the entourage attendant upon the fencing match, including Laertes, whom Claudius takes by the hand to Hamlet, urging reconciliation. Hamlet asks Laertes’ pardon, attributing any offensive acts to his well-published madness. Laertes accepts the apology “in nature,” but withholds total reconciliation until the opinions of his elders can verify that he will not diminish or relinquish his honor by making peace with Hamlet.

Claudius ascertains that Hamlet understands the wager, and Hamlet replies that Claudius has “laid the odds o’ th’ weaker side.” Claudius admits this, but says it is only because Hamlet has improved. The pair take up foils; Laertes puts back the one Osric provides as “too heavy,” and takes another. Claudius drops a pearl into a cup as added incentive for Hamlet, and says if Hamlet scores the first, second, or repays the third hit, the King will drink to him, which will signal the cannoneer to fire so that all will know of Hamlet’s success.

After Hamlet’s first “palpable hit,” Claudius drinks, the cannons fire, and he urges Hamlet to drink; Hamlet, however, wishes to “play this bout first; set it by awhile.” After the second hit, Gertrude drinks to Hamlet’s success—from the poisoned cup, despite Claudius’ attempts to stop her. As Laertes and Hamlet resume, they somehow exchange rapiers and are both wounded. Gertrude realizes she has been poisoned and dies; Hamlet orders the doors locked and the treachery sought out.

Laertes admits that the villainy “is here,” and tells him they are both doomed, having been poisoned by the rapier, and that “the King’s to blame.” Hamlet then wounds Claudius with the “envenomed” point, and forces him to drink the rest of the poisoned cup and “Follow my mother.” The King dies, Laertes and Hamlet forgive one another, and Laertes dies. Horatio intends to drink the rest of the cup, but Hamlet takes it from him and urges him “to tell [his] story.”

Osric enters with news that Fortinbras has returned victorious from Poland. Hamlet endorses him as the next King of Denmark and then dies. Fortinbras and his retinue enter, and the Ambassador from England notes that it is too late for Claudius to thank them, that his commandment has been carried out, “That Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead.” Horatio corrects the Ambassador: “He never gave commandment for their death.” Horatio then orders the bodies placed “High on a stage” for public view, and vows to “Truly deliver” all the bloody and unnatural acts which have transpired to cause these deaths.

Fortinbras with sorrow sees that he now has the opportunity to assume the Danish throne; Horatio hints that Hamlet spoke favorably to that issue, but urges the public ceremonies commence “lest more mischance [on top of] plots and errors happen.” Fortinbras orders Hamlet’s body carried “like a soldier” to the stage, and says if Hamlet had had the chance, he would “have proved most royal.” He orders appropriate funeral rites for Hamlet, including the firing of ordnance, which ends the play.

### **Analysis**

For four acts, Hamlet and Laertes have not met on stage, yet their lives have been closely intertwined. Hamlet’s confusing and truncated relationship with Ophelia and his inadvertent murder of Polonius have made the two young men virtual enemies. Claudius has fanned the flame of Laertes’ vengeance, even setting up the sword fight in which Hamlet is to be murdered. They finally meet in Act V, Scene 1, at Ophelia’s graveside, where they struggle and proclaim their respective loves for the young maiden. But their reconciliation is foreshadowed several times. Hamlet asks Laertes, “What is the reason that you use me thus? I loved you ever”; and shortly thereafter he tells Horatio that he is “very sorry . . . That to Laertes I forgot myself,” and that he plans to “court his favors.” Later, Hamlet receives Gertrude’s message to “use some gentle entertainment to Laertes before you fall to play,” and Hamlet responds, “She well instructs me.”

As they prepare to fence, Claudius takes Laertes' hand and puts it into Hamlet's, urging peace; Hamlet asks Laertes to pardon him, pleading madness. Of course, at this point, Laertes still intends to kill Hamlet, so the reconciliation is feigned. But as Laertes tells Claudius that this time he will score a hit against Hamlet, Laertes adds in an aside, "And yet it is almost against my conscience." And Gertrude's death evokes Laertes' confession to Hamlet: "Hamlet, thou art slain; . . . The foul practice Hath turned itself on me . . . Thy mother's poisoned . . . The King, the King's to blame." As he dies, Laertes asks Hamlet to "Exchange forgiveness with me, . . . Mine and my father's death come not upon thee, Nor thine on me!" Hamlet answers, "Heaven make thee free of it!"

There are several instances of irony in this act. For instance, Ophelia, almost certainly an innocent in this story fraught with betrayal and deceit, is denied a Christian burial because of the suspicious nature of her death. If her death were accidental, as it appears to be, she should have been given full holy rites. Everyone seems to love and want to protect Ophelia: Polonius, Laertes, Gertrude, Claudius—even Hamlet, though he denies it. His "get thee to a nunnery" speech suggests his desire to protect her from men, who are "arrant knaves all," not to be believed; no doubt he thinks primarily of Claudius, but also of himself, as he feigns his madness throughout the play.

At any rate, the pure maid must spend eternity "in ground unsanctified," presumably the fate shared by Polonius, Claudius, and Gertrude for their plottings. Perhaps Laertes and Hamlet will also lie in unsanctified ground for their deeds, unless their acts are done in the name of divine justice, a fine point which troubles Hamlet throughout the play. That she is killed by the "natural" world rather than by the political, which otherwise dominates the play, is further irony; she is done in by the world she claims as her own, shown most clearly by the flowers in her "mad scene."

Compounding her ultimate fate is Hamlet's admission at her funeral that he did love her more than "forty thousand brothers," despite his earlier protestations to the contrary. If Hamlet had not denied his love, perhaps she would not have gone mad, even at Polonius' death.

Laertes exhibits irony in his reluctance to fully accept Hamlet's apology, reconciling "in nature" only, "Till by some elder masters of known honor / I have a voice and precedent of peace / To keep my name ungor'd." Earlier, Laertes was bound to stop at nothing in seeking revenge against Claudius, whom he believed to have killed Polonius. At that time, Claudius urged Laertes to assemble his "wisest friends" to "hear and judge" whether Claudius bore any guilt. The irony is that Claudius, who urged delay and wise counsel, is guilty in principle; while Hamlet, who seeks forgiveness, is ultimately innocent—Polonius' death was accidental. In neither case is an impaneled "jury" likely to know the difference.

A final irony stems from the firing of the cannons in this act. Claudius sets up an elaborate system of signals, beginning with a toast to Hamlet's "hits," which will result in the firing of the cannons. But at the very end of the play, Fortinbras orders "soldiers' music and the rite of war" for Hamlet's passage, and orders, "Go, bid the soldiers shoot," and the stage directions indicate "a peal of ordnance" are to be shot off. What Claudius intended, in a perverse way as signals of Hamlet's success, serve at last as indication of Hamlet's death.

Just as the important events surrounding the Players' preparation and presentation of "The Mousetrap" are telescoped into a very short time frame (see Analysis for Act II), the events leading up to the sword fight are compressed. Claudius first suggests the duel to Laertes in Act IV, Scene 7. He counsels patience at Ophelia's funeral, indicating that their "last night's speech" will soon be put into action. In the next scene, Osric informs Hamlet of the King's wager, set for "immediate trial" if Hamlet agrees. He sends Osric back with his affirmative response, and a Lord returns to double check, and Hamlet again agrees to fight at once and sends the messenger back to Claudius. The royal party enters to witness the duel at line 226, and between lines 281 and 323, everyone has been mortally wounded; by line 358, Gertrude, the King, Laertes, and Hamlet

are all dead. The sense of urgency is created by the increasingly brief interludes between events relevant to the duel.

When Laertes reveals to Hamlet that the treachery “is here” and that “No medicine in the world” can save him, another motif is brought full circle: physical disease as manifestation of spiritual corruption. Evil has finally claimed everyone except Horatio (whom Hamlet barely prevents from committing suicide with the poisoned cup) and Fortinbras. The chain began with Claudius’ murder of his brother in order to achieve the kingship, a political goal; and continued with Claudius’ marriage to Gertrude, a personal prize.

In tandem, these two events precipitate those that follow: Polonius’ death, Ophelia’s madness and death, and the deaths of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, Gertrude, Claudius, Laertes, and Hamlet. The Ghost’s directive in Act I has finally been achieved. But for all of Hamlet’s hesitation, the actual revenge on Claudius is almost incidental, certainly not a premeditated part of the duel.

That Fortinbras succeeds to the Danish throne is significant: like Hamlet, he was seeking to avenge his dead father, a king; but unlike Hamlet, he did not delay and sought to act almost at once. Only the wise counsel and constructive interference of his uncle prevented war with Denmark. As it happened, Fortinbras’ entrance at the finale of the sword fight is perfectly timed, and he has both revenge and royalty at the play’s conclusion.

## 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.

## 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 resolute' (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 Voltmand 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 Jacobean, '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' (1.2.65). 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 prophesies; '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:

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).

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

2. See Gunnar Sjøgren. 'Hamlet and the Coronation of Christian IV', *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 1965, n16, p. 155.

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.

## 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 Voltmand.

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' (2.2.70-71) 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

... at our more considered time we'll read,  
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, their 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.[FN4] 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 Voltmand 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 an entertaining perspective on these two characters, see Tom Stoppard. *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*.

## 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, unaneled,  
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 openly 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 suggests 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 set me packing' (3.4.218). In a dramatic sense, however, Polonius' demise is a non-event when placed in the context of the play's focus on Hamlet's relationship with his father. Nonetheless, Hamlet will have to face and deal with the fallout from this deed.

## 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.

## 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 cortege.

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?'

## Quizzes

# Act I Questions and Answers

## Study Questions

1. Why does the Ghost of Hamlet's father appear but not speak to the officers on sentinel duty?
2. What do Ghostly apparitions usually portend, according to these witnesses?
3. What is the content of the dispatches Claudius has sent with Voltmand and Cornelius to the King of Norway?
4. In his soliloquy, what are Hamlet's reasons for objecting to his mother's remarriage?
5. What advice does Laertes give to Ophelia as he says farewell to her prior to his departure for Paris?
6. What advice does she give Laertes in return?
7. What is the thrust of the advice Polonius gives Laertes as his son prepares to leave?
8. What does Polonius instruct Ophelia to do regarding Hamlet?
9. What does the apparition tell Hamlet?
10. What two-part oath does Hamlet extract from his companions following the encounter with the Ghost?

## Answers

1. Horatio believes he has offended it by demanding that it speak, and Marcellus believes his threat of violence was ill-conceived on a spirit, which is "as the air, invulnerable." Horatio and Marcellus also recall the folk wisdom that the cock's crowing sends spirits to their "confine." Additionally, in the season just before Christmas, the cock crows all night, and "no spirit dare stir abroad . . . So hallowed and so gracious is that time."
2. Horatio remembers similar Ghostly appearances were reported shortly before Julius Caesar's fall, and believes the Ghost to be a "precurse of feared events" to Denmark. "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," suggests that Horatio acknowledges that the apparition may not have any particular relevance to the current political situation.
3. Claudius wants Norway, uncle to Fortinbras, "to suppress [Fortinbras'] further gait herein, in that the levies, / The lists, and full proportions are all made / Out of [Norway's] subject. . . ."
4. Hamlet feels the marriage was too soon after his father's death; he can't see how his mother could have so soon forgotten her love and devotion to her husband. Furthermore, he feels his uncle is "no more like my father / Than I to Hercules." He believes his mother has violated English canon law, which held that marriage with a deceased brother's widow was incestuous [Hubler, 45].
5. Laertes tells his sister to regard Hamlet's attentions as trifling, toying, temporary diversions of youthful fancy. Also, he reminds her that Hamlet, as heir apparent, is subject to the will of Denmark; he may say he loves her now, but if the state requires it, he would have to marry otherwise. If in the meantime she loses her virtue to him, it will be for nothing. "Be wary then; best safety lies in fear. . . ."

6. She urges him to take his own advice, and not be like a pastor who instructs his flock how to achieve heaven but who “Himself the primrose path of dalliance treads . . .”
7. It is wide ranging, but urges moderation, integrity, thrift, and “above all, to thine own self be true . . . Thou canst not then be false to any man.”
8. Polonius says Ophelia is a “baby” to have believed Hamlet’s “tenders of affection,” which are “mere implorators [solicitors] . . . [meant] to beguile.” He commands her to “Be something scanter of your maiden presence. . . . [nor] slander any moment leisure / As to give words or talk with the Lord Hamlet.”
9. The Ghost reveals the circumstances of his murder and charges Hamlet to avenge his death, but to “Leave [thy mother] to heaven” and to her own conscience.
10. Hamlet makes them swear never to tell what they have seen that night, and never, “How strange or odd some’er I bear myself (As I perchance hereafter shall think meet To put an antic disposition on), / That you, at such times seeing me, never shall . . . note / That you know aught of me. . . .” In other words, he makes them swear not to reveal that his madness is merely put on.

## Act II Questions and Answers

### Study Questions

1. What task does Polonius assign Reynaldo in Paris?
2. Why is Ophelia so upset when she speaks with her father?
3. In what respect does Polonius change his mind about Hamlet and the prince’s relationship to Ophelia?
4. What task does Claudius assign to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern?
5. What news do Voltemand and Cornelius bring back from Norway?
6. What do Claudius and Gertrude conclude after hearing Polonius read the letter from Hamlet to Ophelia?
7. What does Polonius mean in an aside, as he speaks with Hamlet, “Though this be madness, yet there is method in’t”?
8. What does Hamlet make Rosencrantz and Guildenstern confess?
9. Why have Hamlet’s two friends arranged for the theatrical troupe to perform at the palace?
10. What is the significance of the speech which Hamlet requests from the actor, taken from the story of the Trojan War?

### Answers

1. Polonius gives Reynaldo “money and . . . notes” to give to Laertes; and instructs him “to make [indirect] inquire / Of his behavior.” Polonius wants to know what Laertes is doing in Paris, and intends “By indirections [to] find directions out.”
2. “Affrighted,” she reports that Hamlet came to her private room, his clothing undone and dirty, and his expression looking “As if he had been loosed out of hell / To speak of horrors—. . . .” He held her by the

wrist and stared and sighed, and then went out the door, his eyes still on her “with his head over his shoulder turned.”

3. Polonius diagnoses Hamlet’s behavior as “the very ecstasy of love, / Whose violent property fordoes itself / And leads the will to desperate undertakings. . . .” He apologizes that he had earlier misjudged Hamlet, fearing “he did but trifle / And meant to wrack thee. . . .” He excuses his error by noting that it is as common for elders to be overcalculating as it is for youth to “lack discretion.”

4. Claudius entreats the pair to remain at court for “Some little time” and “draw [Hamlet] on to pleasures” in an attempt to learn what has caused his “transformation.” Claudius says his motive is a desire to help Hamlet recover: “. . . Whether aught to us unknown afflicts him thus, That opened lies within our remedy.”

5. Voltmand reports that the old King, uncle to young Fortinbras, had at first thought his nephew’s preparations were for war against Poland. But, discovering they were “against your Highness,” he stopped Fortinbras and rebuked him. Fortinbras promised never to wage war against Denmark, whereupon Norway rewarded his nephew with an annual allowance of “threescore thousand crowns” and sent him “against the Polack.” Norway now asks for Fortinbras’ “quiet pass Through [Claudius’] dominions for this enterprise. . . .”

6. Polonius states that since he instructed Ophelia to shun Hamlet, the prince’s behavior has deteriorated from “a sadness, then into a fast, Thence to a watch, thence into a weakness, / Thence to a lightness, . . . Into the madness wherein now he raves. . . .” The Queen agrees: “It may be, very like.” This is a shift from Gertrude’s earlier assumption that “it is no other but the main, His father’s death and our o’erhasty marriage.”

7. Polonius realizes that although Hamlet’s conversation with him seems irrational, it makes a certain kind of sense. The particular line reference has to do with the book which Hamlet purports to be reading, which is critical of old men and their infirmities and flaws. Hamlet points out that if Polonius “could go backward” like a crab, the old man would be the same age as Hamlet; therefore, Hamlet says, although he “most powerfully and potently” believes old men to be as the writer describes, he sees that he and Polonius are basically the same—that Polonius is just an older version of himself, or that he is just a younger version of Polonius. This reinforces what Polonius says: “A is far gone, far gone. / And truly in my youth I suffered much extremity for love, very near this.”

8. Hamlet urges them to reveal “whether you were sent for or no.” After brief consultation, Guildenstern admits, “My lord, we were sent for.” Hamlet then proceeds to explain why they have been sent for, detailing his own symptoms of depression and malaise.

9. Rosencrantz identifies the traveling company as “Even those you were wont to take such delight in, the tragedians of the city.” The performance has been arranged for Hamlet’s pleasure, apparently.

10. Hamlet praises the artistic quality of the play from which the scene is taken, noting that the play did not appeal to the masses. He asks particularly for “. . . Aeneas’ tale to Dido, . . . especially when he speaks of Priam’s slaughter.” The allusion is to a play based on Virgil’s *Aeneid*, the passage which tells how Pyrrhus, son of Achilles, extracts revenge upon the father (Priam) of Achilles’ murderer (Paris). The intensity of the violence is horrifyingly graphic. This scene of revenge acts as a foil to Hamlet’s own delay in avenging his father’s murder.

# Act III Questions and Answers

## Study Questions

1. What do Rosencrantz and Guildenstern report to Claudius regarding their conversation with Hamlet?
2. What do the pair fail to reveal to Claudius?
3. What favor does Hamlet ask of Horatio?
4. What is the plot of the Dumb Show the Players present?
5. What is the significance of the play's title, "The Mousetrap"?
6. What does Hamlet mean, as he prepares to visit his mother, when he says, "O heart, lose not thy nature"?
7. What rationale do Rosencrantz and Guildenstern give for accepting Claudius' commission to take Hamlet to England forthwith?
8. What is ironic about Hamlet's failure to kill Claudius while the King is kneeling in prayer?
9. What is Hamlet's reaction when he realizes he has killed Polonius rather than Claudius, whom he had presumed to be the one hiding behind the curtain?
10. What is the apparent purpose of the Ghost's appearance in the Queen's bedroom while Hamlet speaks with his mother?

## Answers

1. They say Hamlet was polite but not very inclined to talk about what was bothering him. They report that Hamlet seemed pleased that the Players had been engaged for a performance.
2. They do not disclose that Hamlet made them admit that they had been sent by Claudius, nor that Hamlet revealed that Claudius and Gertrude are deceived about his seeming madness.
3. He wants Horatio to carefully observe Claudius during the play, to watch his reactions, to help to determine whether the Ghost which named Claudius murderer was heaven sent or from "Vulcan's stithy."
4. A queen and king make affectionate show; he lies down and falls asleep, she leaves. Another man enters and pours poison in the king's ear, and leaves. The queen returns, is distraught, but is eventually comforted and ultimately seduced by the poisoner himself.
5. The play "is the image of a murder done in Vienna," and is, in fact, entitled, "The Murder of Gonzago," which Hamlet specifically requests the Players to perform with the addition of the lines which he inserts. That he tells Claudius it is called, "The Mousetrap," suggests his ulterior motive, especially since he continues, "Your Majesty, and we that have free souls, it touches us not." The clear implication is that Claudius does not have a clear conscience, and will, therefore, be "touched" by the play—as he obviously is.
6. He does not wish to forget that she is his mother, whom he does not mean to harm; on the other hand, he wants to rebuke her for her actions. He remarks on this inconsistency: "My tongue and soul in this be hypocrites."

7. They say that because so many lives depend upon a king's life, he must be protected. A king's death acts like a "gulf" (whirlpool) and sucks whoever is nearby down with it. Whatever affects the king, affects the populace as a whole: "Never alone Did the King sigh, but with a general groan."

8. Claudius kneels but is unable to pray. Had Hamlet killed him then, as he first intended, Claudius' soul would have been damned.

9. Hamlet is disrespectful to Polonius, and not in the least remorseful about his error. In essence he says Polonius was a busy body who deserved what he got. He "[lugs] the guts" into the next room without respect or ceremony. He does say that he repents Polonius' death, but says he was only acting as heaven's "scourge and minister," and knows that he "will answer well / The death [he] gave him."

10. The Ghost says, "This visitation Is but to whet thy almost blunted purpose." Hamlet has been carried away in scolding his mother for her marriage to his father's brother, a man much inferior to her husband. Gertrude has repeatedly cried for Hamlet to "speak no more," but he has been unrelenting. The Ghost now reminds Hamlet of his task of revenge, and bids him give comfort now to his mother, on whom "amazement . . . sits." Because she can neither hear nor see the Ghost, she concludes that Hamlet is truly insane; the Ghost asks Hamlet to "step between her and her fighting soul!"

## Act IV Questions and Answers

### Study Questions

1. What is Claudius' response when Gertrude tells him that Hamlet has murdered Polonius?
2. What does Claudius direct Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to do?
3. Why does Hamlet hide Polonius' corpse and then dash away when Rosencrantz and Guildenstern question him about it?
4. Why does Hamlet call Claudius "dear Mother"?
5. Why does Fortinbras send word to the Danish king (Claud-ius)?
6. How does Hamlet contrast himself (all men) to beasts?
7. How does Claudius propose to satisfy Laertes' suspicions?
8. What reasons does Claudius give Laertes for not taking action against Hamlet, who, Claudius says, "Pursued [his] life"?
9. Why does Claudius plan to poison the drink, in addition to poisoning the rapier tip which Laertes will wield?
10. How does Ophelia drown?

### Answers

1. He says he himself would have been killed, had he been behind the curtain; that Hamlet's continued freedom threatens him, the Queen herself, and everyone. He fears he will be blamed for not keeping Hamlet restrained, but that love often prevents us from seeing the best course. Claudius tells her that Hamlet must be sent away (by ship), and that they must make people understand and approve their actions.



2. He directs them to get help and find Hamlet, “speak fair” to him, and bring Polonius’ body into the chapel; “I pray you haste in this.”
3. Hamlet is continuing in his “madness,” behaving in ways which seem irrational to his family and friends. His seeming insanity will also act as a kind of shield for him; how can Claudius order his punishment for Polonius’ murder if he was mad? Madmen are not responsible for their actions. Finally, Hamlet is taking delight in tormenting those who are obviously humoring him, while at the same time plotting against him.
4. Because “father and mother” equal “man and wife,” and “man and wife” is one flesh, Claudius and Gertrude are one and the same. Hence, Claudius can be called “mother” and, presumably, Gertrude could be called “father.”
5. He wants Claudius to provide safe escort for his (Norwegian) army as they march across Denmark, as Claudius had earlier promised.
6. He says a man who spends his time merely sleeping and feeding is only a beast; God gave man reason, to see both ahead and behind, not to become moldy from disuse. He can’t decide if “thinking too precisely on th’ event” is “bestial oblivion [forgetfulness]” or “some craven scruple.” He believes such thoughts are one part wisdom and three parts cowardice; since he has “cause, and will, and strength, and means to do’t,” he doesn’t see why he hesitates.
7. He tells Laertes to gather his choice of his wisest friends to hear Claudius’ version of the events; he promises to give up everything, including his life, if he be shown to have caused—directly or indirectly—Polonius’ death. Otherwise, he asks Laertes to join with him to give Laertes’ soul “content.” Laertes specifies that he wants the answers to a number of issues surrounding his father’s death, and Claudius agrees, adding, “where th’ offense is, let the great ax fall.”
8. Claudius says that Hamlet’s mother “Lives almost by [Hamlet’s] looks, and . . . She is so conjunctive to [Claudius’] life and soul,” that the King cannot do anything which would hurt her. Secondly, he says that public sentiment is so solidly behind Hamlet that his sins would be transformed “to graces,” and Claudius’ charges would fall on himself rather than “where [he] had aimed them.”
9. If the sword point does not work properly, and their true purpose be discovered, the tainted cup, offered to Hamlet when he is “hot and dry,” will insure his death. Claudius, having bet on Hamlet to win, will be above suspicion in his death.
10. She is trying to hang flower garlands on the branches of a weeping willow which overhangs a brook; the branch breaks, spilling her into the water. Her clothes puff out and buoy her up for awhile, but eventually become saturated and pull her “to muddy death.”

## Act V Questions and Answers

### Study Questions

1. Why is there debate surrounding the nature of Ophelia’s funeral?
2. How long has the gravedigger been sexton, and when did he first become employed?
3. What joking insult to the English does Shakespeare put into the gravedigger’s dialogue, regarding Hamlet’s madness?

4. What cause does Laertes ascribe to Ophelia's madness, which led to her death?
5. What prompts Hamlet's outburst at Ophelia's graveside?
6. What order did Claudius' letter, carried by Guildenstern and Rosencrantz, convey to the English regarding Hamlet's fate?
7. How does Hamlet justify his counterfeit command that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are to be murdered by the English?
8. In his apology to Laertes, what does Hamlet mean when he says, "I have shot my arrow o'er the house and hurt my brother"?
9. Why does Hamlet forbid Horatio to drink the rest of the poisoned cup?
10. Who will ascend to power as the new King of Denmark?

### Answers

1. The issue is whether her drowning was accidental, in which case she may have a Christian burial—which the coroner has ruled, the gravedigger says; or whether it was intentional, in which case she may not have a Christian burial. Later, the Doctor of Divinity confirms that though "Her death was doubtful," the King has ruled that her burial be Christian. Thus, the gravedigger's supposition that nobility carries special privilege is probably true in this case.
2. The gravedigger has served as sexton for thirty years; he came the "day that our last king Hamlet overcame Fortinbras. . . . that very day that young Hamlet was born."
3. The gravedigger notes that Hamlet has been sent to England to "recover his wits," but adds that if he doesn't, it will not matter because "There the men are as mad as he."
4. Laertes blames Ophelia's madness on the "wicked deed," presumably her father's murder; he calls down a "ten times treble" curse on the killer, Hamlet.
5. He feels that Laertes is trying to outdo his own grief for Ophelia with all Laertes' rantings and his leaping into the grave. He leaps in as well, and says he'll "rant as well as [Laertes]."
6. For the good of both Denmark and England, they were to cut off Hamlet's head as soon as they had read the letter.
7. He tells Horatio that "they did make love to this employment." Their "baser natures" got caught in the sword play of "mighty opposites."
8. He means that his murder of Polonius was not "a purposed evil" and that he did not intentionally harm Laertes by his action, which Hamlet attributes to his own madness.
9. He wants Horatio to tell his (Hamlet's) story so that his name will be cleared rather than "wounded."
10. Fortinbras, whom Hamlet predicts will win the election; and Fortinbras himself remarks that he has some "rights of memory in this kingdom" which he plans to take advantage of, though he "with sorrow . . . [embraces his] fortune."

# 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!  
(V.i.184-187)

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 word play, 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.

## Character Analysis

### Other Characters (Descriptions)

**Attendants:** The king appears in state accompanied by attendants, and attendants wait on various members of Danish court and visitors to the court. Attendants follow the king when he enters or exits a scene. They are sent by the king to look for the body of Polonius. Attendants separate Hamlet and Laertes when they fight at Ophelia's funeral.

**Barnardo:** Barnardo, with Francisco and Marcellus, is one of the guards of the Danish ruler's castle, Elsinore. He and Marcellus have seen the ghost twice before the opening of the play, and have chosen to tell Prince Hamlet's scholarly friend Horatio about the occurrence. Barnardo speaks the play's first, ominous words: "Who's there?" (I.i.1).

**Clowns:** See Gravediggers

**Cornelius:** Cornelius and Voltemand are Danish ambassadors, sent by King Claudius in I.ii.26-38 to the king of Norway, the uncle of young Fortinbras, to urge him to squelch his nephew's threats against Danish land. They return in II.ii.40 to report that their mission was successful.

**Council:** The Council is a governing body present with the king at official meetings. The Council is said by the king to have approved of his marriage to Gertrude and his succession to the Danish throne.

**Doctor of Divinity:** The doctor of divinity is a clergyman who reluctantly officiates at the funeral and burial of Ophelia. When Laertes calls for more elaborate religious ceremony, the doctor states that it is a profanation to bury a probable suicide in sanctified grounds with holy rites. Laertes replies in anger: "I tell thee, churlish priest / A minist'ring angel shall my sister be / When thou liest howling" (V.i.240- 42).

**English Embassadors:** The ambassadors (or ambassadors) enter the Danish court at the end of the play. They report the deaths of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern.

**Fortinbras:** Fortinbras is the heir to the throne of Norway. His situation resembles that of Hamlet: his father was king, and his uncle is currently ruling. Prior to the play, the old Norwegian King Fortinbras lost both his life and Norwegian lands in the battle with King Hamlet. Early in the play, young Fortinbras is described as seeking to regain the lost Norwegian land during the period of uncertainty following King Hamlet's death. Negotiations between King Claudius and the current king of Norway, however, result in Fortinbras agreeing to cease hostilities in Denmark. He petitions for safe passage through Denmark to Poland. Hamlet describes Fortinbras as "a delicate and tender prince" (IV.iv.48) who is easily incited to fight in the cause of personal or national pride. He passes through Denmark on his return from his conquest of Poland, and is named by the dying Prince Hamlet as the most likely successor to the throne of Denmark. Fortinbras orders a soldier's funeral for Hamlet, and speaks the last words of the play, commending Hamlet as likely to have been a good ruler.

**Francisco:** Francisco is a guard on watch at the opening of the play. He is relieved by Barnardo. Since the night is cold, he is glad to go in. He reports that his watch passed by undisturbed: "Not a mouse stirring" (I.i. 10).

**Gentleman:** An unnamed gentleman announces Ophelia's presence to the queen. When the queen seems disinclined to see Ophelia, he plainly states the case for seeing her, describing her distracted speech. An unnamed gentleman announces to Horatio the sailors who come with Hamlet's letter.

**Gravediggers:** The gravediggers (in some editions referred to as "clowns") are two rustic working men. One of them, referred to as Goodman Delver, has been sexton (or church warden) for 30 years—ever since "that very day that young Hamlet was born" (V.i.147), which establishes Hamlet's age at this point in the play. The two appear together at the beginning of Act V, engaged in their task of digging Ophelia's grave. They discuss the questionable circumstances of Ophelia's death, and wonder if Christian burial is warranted for an apparent suicide (Church law forbade burying suicides in consecrated ground). The sexton sends the other gravedigger off to fetch "a sup of liquor" (V.i.60). Hamlet and Horatio encounter him at his work, singing merrily and unearthing bones and dirt together. Hamlet enters into a jocular, equivocating exchange with the sexton, who matches wits handily with the prince. Hamlet becomes serious and contemplative when the gravedigger reveals the identity of one skull as that of Yorick, old King Hamlet's jester and a companion of Hamlet's childhood.

**Guard:** The king's guard carries torches to the play. The king is accompanied by two or three guards after Polonius's death. The king calls for his "Swissers" (IV.v.98), or Swiss guards, when a noise is heard after Ophelia's exit and just before Laertes's bursting into the scene at the head of a mob.

**Guildenstern:** Guildenstern and Rosencrantz are friends from Hamlet's youth sent for by the king and queen to learn the cause of Hamlet's change of personality. The two are perfectly willing to supply covert intelligence to the king. While both profess to be concerned about Hamlet's welfare, because it is bound up with the welfare of the Danish state, they are commonly considered by commentators on the play as opportunists who are currying royal favor with Claudius solely to remain in the good graces of the current power structure. Their exchanges with Hamlet generally reveal that he is suspicious of them, mistrustful of their purpose in court, and too wary to reveal anything about himself to them. With Rosencrantz, Guildenstern is unknowingly sent to his death in England by Hamlet's discovery of Claudius's plot and Hamlet's quick construction of a counterplot.

**Ladies:** Ladies are present at court scenes. Ophelia wistfully bids ladies good night after her mad appearance just before Laertes's arrival at court at the head of a mob.

**Lord:** An unnamed lord comes as a messenger to Hamlet from the king, announcing that the court is ready for the fencing display.

**Lords:** Lords attend the play, the fencing match, and other public occasions in the court.

**Marcellus:** Marcellus is one of the night watch at Elsinore. He has seen the ghost two times before the opening of the play and asks Horatio to witness the third appearance.

**Messengers:** A messenger brings letters from Hamlet to the king. The messenger is also dismissed from the presence of the king.

**Norwegian Captain:** He leads forces for Fortinbras in their passage through Denmark to Poland and identifies the Norwegian army to Hamlet. He also expresses his view that the land to be fought over is worthless.

**Officers:** Officers enter before the royal party with cushions, foils, and daggers for the fencing scene.

**Orsic:** Osric is a courtier, described by Hamlet as being of little significance himself, but important insofar as he owns extensive lands. He delivers the king's challenge of a fencing match between Hamlet and Laertes to Hamlet and Horatio (V.ii), speaking effusively in an affected manner which Hamlet mocks and parodies back to him. Even Horatio makes mild fun at Orsic's expense, after Hamlet's own rhetorical flourishes leave him befuddled.

**Players:** A troupe of traveling actors already known to Hamlet. They arrive at Elsinore to perform for the Danish court, and Hamlet employs them to enact a play that mirrors the circumstances of his father's murder.

**Polonius:** Polonius, Laertes's and Ophelia's father, is an elderly and long-winded courtier and chief counselor in the Danish court. Polonius demonstrates a propensity for hypocrisy and spying: his first major speech (I.iii), to his departing son Laertes, is a lengthy diatribe on, among other things, the virtue of being close-mouthed and discreet. In II.i Polonius instructs his servant Reynaldo to spy on Laertes in France and report on his conduct. Ophelia enters, describing Hamlet's strange behavior. This causes Polonius to question whether Hamlet is "mad for thy [Ophelia's] love" (II.i.82). Polonius discusses Hamlet's bizarre behavior concerning Ophelia with Claudius, stating bluntly, "Your noble son is mad" (II.ii.92). Polonius then arranges for himself and Claudius to secretly observe an encounter between Hamlet and Ophelia to prove Hamlet's insanity to the king.

Polonius dies in III.iv. He hides behind an arras following a brief conversation with Gertrude. From his hiding place, he overhears Hamlet's confrontation with Gertrude, during the course of which Gertrude asks Hamlet if he is going to murder her. When the queen cries out, Polonius, still behind the curtain, calls out for help. Hamlet then stabs him through the curtain and kills him, apparently thinking he was Claudius.

The aged minister of state makes a smooth transition from one master to the next, and he abets Claudius's efforts to control Hamlet. Polonius is capable of subterfuge, but he is also a somewhat ridiculous figure, a "doting" father who hands down well-meaning platitudes like "To thine own self be true," to his son. We have the sense that Polonius is a stock comic character misplaced in a bloody tragedy.

**Reynaldo:** Reynaldo is a servant whom Polonius instructs to go to Paris in order to observe and report on Laertes's conduct.

**Rosencrantz:** Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are friends from Hamlet's youth sent for by the king and queen to learn the cause of Hamlet's change of personality. The two are perfectly willing to supply covert intelligence to the king. While both profess to be concerned about Hamlet's welfare, because it is bound up with the welfare of the Danish state, they are commonly considered by commentators on the play as opportunists who are currying royal favor with Claudius solely to remain in the good graces of the current

power structure. Their exchanges with Hamlet generally reveal that he is suspicious of them, mistrustful of their purpose in court, and too wary to reveal anything about himself to them. With Guildenstern, Rosencrantz is unknowingly sent to his death in England by Hamlet's discovery of Claudius's plot and Hamlet's quick construction of a counterplot.

**Sailors:** The sailors are from the pirate ship that intercepts the ship conveying Hamlet, Rosencrantz, and Guildenstern to England. They carry letters from Hamlet to Horatio and the king, ransoming Hamlet back to Denmark.

**Soldiers:** Fortinbras's Norwegian troops, marching dutifully to the fight. Hamlet says they "go to their graves like beds" (IV.iv.62), and seems to regret his own lack of resolute action.

**Voltemand:** Voltemand and Cornelius are Danish ambassadors, sent by King Claudius in I.ii.26-38, to the king of Norway, the uncle of young Fortinbras, to urge him to squelch his nephew's threats against Danish land. They return in II.ii.40 to report that their mission was successful.

## Hamlet (Character Analysis)

The character of Hamlet dominates Shakespeare's tragedy of the same name, yet Hamlet at the start of the play is not a commanding figure. Indeed, when we first see the Prince, his posture is defensive, Hamlet taking a passive, if resentful, stance toward the events that have befallen him. Slow to the conviction that the ghost is his dead father and that Claudius is guilty of regicide, Hamlet does not go straight to the task at hand. Hamlet's delay or procrastination is something about which critics have wondered and that the character himself agonizes, his self-reproach reaching an apex in Act IV, scene iv, which concludes with the words "O, from this time forth, My thoughts be bloody, or be nothing worth!" (lines 65-66). The question remains: Why doesn't Hamlet act?

One response to this question stresses Hamlet as a man of thought and words, as opposed to deeds. Shakespeare's Danish prince is one of the most intelligent protagonists in tragic drama. Unlike many other Elizabethan revenge tragedy heroes, Hamlet is given to philosophy and abstraction. At times, it seems that the play is less about Hamlet taking action in the external world, than it is about his grappling with the key existential problems of human existence. From this standpoint, Hamlet does not act immediately because he is too preoccupied with analyzing his situation and himself in the broadest terms imaginable.

Hamlet is also a melancholy figure, given to depression, who is victimized by a cruel fate and compelled to undertake a revenge mission for which he is not prepared. Not only are Hamlet's musings about life extensive, they are uniformly dark. Seen in this light, Hamlet does not act because he lacks the emotional fortitude to do so, depression and courage being difficult to reconcile.

There are, however, good reasons for Hamlet to avoid acting precipitously. The story of Old Hamlet's murder is known to him only through the agency of a ghost, and killing the king on the word of an apparition is plainly a problematic (and possibly mistaken) act. Claudius explains his exile of Hamlet to England by referring to the Prince's popularity among the Danish people. But the Danish people are a fickle lot; many of them come to Laertes' cause against the Prince. Killing a king is a weighty matter, and many modern critics have argued that, in his particular circumstances, Hamlet is wise to defer action.

In the end, Hamlet does act, defying augury in accepting the challenge to duel with Laertes. But the change in Hamlet's character takes place in scene i of Act V, and is expressed in his self-assertion that he is "Hamlet the Dane." It is not in the final scene, but in the graveyard scene immediately preceding it that a "new," self-defined Hamlet appears on the stage, ready for action however it may be directed by divine will or by

chance. A complex personality at the play's start, Hamlet is all the more fascinating because he undergoes dramatic character development.

### **Additional Hamlet Analysis:**

The reasons for Hamlet's delay have led to various critical interpretations of his character. One critical perspective treats the prince as a tragic hero having three prominent characteristics: a willpower that surpasses average human beings, an extraordinarily intense power of feeling, and an unusually high level of intelligence. Each of these traits can be found in Hamlet, but the ambiguity surrounding his tragic flaw, or the defect in his character that leads to his downfall, remains the subject of critical debate.

One argument is that the prince's fatal error which causes him to delay killing Claudius is his preoccupation with moral beauty and, with its loss in Denmark, his desire to die. Hamlet's obsession with death and suicide thus demonstrates that even before he encounters the Ghost, he has lost the will to involve himself in worldly affairs. This notion corresponds to another important reading of the prince as a victim of excessive melancholy, or of an abnormal state of depression. Hamlet's melancholy is initially attributed to his father's death and his uncle's hasty marriage to his mother. The appearance of the Ghost, however, intensifies his grief, and the spirit's demand that his son remember him arrests the natural progression of Hamlet's mourning and recovery. Further, the prince is grieved by a mounting sense of loss—not only does he lose his father, but he is betrayed by his mother, he loses Ophelia's affections, and he is confronted with deception by his two friends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Hamlet dwells on these problems in periods of brooding inaction that reveal the full extent of his pain and suffering.

Another, more controversial, reading of the hero's character is that he suffers from an Oedipus Complex. This psychological disorder reflects the unconscious desire of a son to kill his father and replace him as the object of the mother's love. Viewed in this light, Hamlet delays killing Claudius because he subconsciously identifies with his uncle's crime and shares his guilt. According to some critics, Hamlet's Oedipal impulse also explains why he speaks to Gertrude like a jealous lover, why he dwells on his mother's sexual relations with Claudius, and why he treats his uncle as a rival throughout the play.

## **Claudius (Character Analysis)**

Claudius is the king of Denmark and brother of the dead king, which makes him Hamlet's uncle. Claudius has killed his brother to gain the throne and has married his brother's wife, Gertrude. Throughout the play, the nature of Claudius's kingship is displayed. Because Claudius is shrewd and able, though not always ethical or moral, Hamlet describes the contest of intelligence and will between them as that of "mighty opposites" (V.ii.62).

Claudius is clearly the source of the rottenness that pervades Denmark. He is a clever "monster," who is able to devise plots and plans that conceal his intentions and to manipulate others into furthering them. On the other hand, as in the "confession" scene of Act III, Claudius has a conscience, realizing full well that his crime "is rank" and "smells to heaven" (III.iii). Claudius deserves his fate; killed by the very instruments that he (and Laertes) have devised; still, in his remorse and his affection toward Gertrude, Claudius is not completely beyond redemption.

Additionally, Claudius's character provides perhaps the best illustration of the theme of appearance versus reality in *Hamlet*. Initially, Shakespeare depicts Hamlet's uncle as the consummate monarch who justifies his ascent to the throne and his marriage to Gertrude with confident eloquence and who competently handles Fortinbras's threat to Denmark. But as the play progresses, Claudius's villainy becomes more apparent, revealing that he is little more than an evil hypocrite.



Claudius has a number of foreign and domestic problems to contend with. One of the first internal problems is to have the country accept him as king. This is handled by having the Council support his marriage to Gertrude and his kingship, and Claudius refers to their support—that they "have freely gone / With this affair along" (I.ii.15-6)—in his opening remarks as he sits in state.

The Danish kingdom is threatened from without by young Fortinbras, son of the old ruler of Norway, who was killed by Hamlet's father. Old Fortinbras's defeat and death resulted in a forfeiture of lands to Denmark; however, young Fortinbras wants the lands returned and thinks to take advantage of the upheaval in Denmark, occasioned by King Hamlet's death, to mount an attack. Claudius sends ambassadors to young Fortinbras's uncle (the brother of that country's dead king and presumably the current king of Norway), asking him to restrain his nephew and make him abide by the heraldic rules of the conflict between old Fortinbras and old Hamlet.

The king has noticed that Hamlet has been depressed since his father's funeral two months ago, and advises him that it is against heaven, the dead, and nature itself to continue immoderate grieving. Claudius names Hamlet as his immediate heir to the throne of Denmark and urges him to remain in Denmark as the "chiefest courtier" (I.ii.117) rather than returning to school in Wittenberg.

Meanwhile, the ghost appears to Hamlet, who subsequently vows revenge for the death of his father. Hamlet however avoids acting on this promise.

The king sends for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, friends of Hamlet from his youth, to try to learn what is troubling him. Claudius also listens to Polonius's claim that Hamlet is troubled by lovesickness for Ophelia. He agrees to test this theory by observing Hamlet in conversation with Ophelia. Though Polonius continues to be convinced of his own view, the king alertly dismisses this view after their concealed observation of Hamlet. He says: "Love? his affections do not that way tend" (III.i.162) and realizes "There's something in his soul / O'er which his melancholy sits on brood" (III.i.164-5). Claudius plans to send Hamlet to England for a change of scene. He even agrees to Polonius's suggested intermediate step of having Hamlet talk to the queen about his changed demeanor.

In III.ii, the king witnesses his own crime in a play performed before the royal court. When one of the actors pours poison in another actor's ear, the king rises enraged, calling for lights, and leaves. Alone in his room, Claudius tries to pray for forgiveness for his misdeeds but acknowledges to himself that he is not truly penitent because he still enjoys, "those effects for which I did the murder [murder]: / My crown, my own ambition, and my queen" (III.iii.54-55). Fearing for his own safety, the king commissions Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to take Hamlet to England as soon as possible. However, he does not tell Gertrude that he has given Rosencrantz and Guildenstern sealed letters to the English king calling for Hamlet's execution in England.

Concern about public opinion regarding the quick burial of Polonius, the removal of Hamlet from the Danish realm, Ophelia's madness, and Laertes's return from France, compound the king's problems. However, the king is adept in handling Laertes, who initially suspects the king's involvement in the death of Polonius. Claudius says very majestically that "divinity doth hedge a king" (IV.v.124) and appears unafraid by the menacing manner of Laertes. He directs an angry, amazed, and grieving Laertes to let Laertes's wisest followers judge whether the king was involved directly or indirectly in Polonius's death. In a gesture of bravado, the king says he will give up his kingdom, crown, life, and all to Laertes if the followers implicate him in Polonius's death. He further explains to Laertes that no public inquiry was possible because the queen loves Hamlet and also because the public regards Hamlet so well. When the king and Laertes discover together that Hamlet is returning to Denmark, Claudius announces his plan to have Hamlet killed, and Laertes expresses his desire to be a part of that plan. As the details are discussed, Claudius persuades Laertes to agree to a plan less straightforward than Laertes's desire to "cut his [Hamlet's] throat i' the' church" (IV.vii.126). In

the end, Claudius is tripped up by his own multiple plots against Hamlet; his queen dies by drinking the poisoned wine, intended to be a back-up plan to kill Hamlet, and Claudius himself is killed when Hamlet wounds him with the poisoned sword.

## Gertrude (Character Analysis)

Gertrude, queen of Denmark, is the widow of the late King Hamlet and the mother of Prince Hamlet, who is the title character of the play. Gertrude has recently married her brother-in-law. Claudius, the new king, is the brother of the late king and thus Prince Hamlet's uncle.

Gertrude is central to the action of the play, despite the fact that she has relatively few lines. Hamlet's disgust with his mother's marrying less than two months after his father's death and marrying Claudius is one of the main subjects of his agonized reflections in the course of the play. Not only does Hamlet consider Claudius inferior to his father in every respect, but in Shakespeare's time, it was considered a form of incest for a widow to marry her brother-in-law.

Just how deeply Gertrude is involved in her second husband's plot to kill Old Hamlet is unclear; by the final scene, it seems that the Queen was ignorant of the crime. Nevertheless, she marries her brother-in-law only a few months after her husband's death. Clearly, while he is directed by the Ghost to refrain from harming his mother, Hamlet views her (and women at large) with contempt. Far more so than her consort, Gertrude has "redeeming" qualities; she appears to be truly concerned by her son's depression and madness, and she displays a deep (if ill-placed) love toward Claudius.

In addition, critics generally regard Gertrude as highly dependent on and easily manipulated by Claudius; her chief contribution to the drama is the anger and disillusionment she arouses in Hamlet by marrying his uncle. Some critics have risen to the queen's defense, however, arguing that she often offers concise and pithy remarks in the play which reflect her ability to grasp the magnitude of various situations. Moreover, she demonstrates strong character in the closet scene (Act III, scene iv) by accepting Hamlet's accusation of lust and admitting her sin.

Gertrude first appears Act I, Scene ii, where she urges Hamlet not to mourn his father's death excessively. In the soliloquy that follows, Hamlet expresses a general weariness and disgust with life, which he links directly to his feelings about his mother's marriage.

Later in Act I, Hamlet encounters the ghost of his father. The ghost accuses Claudius of murdering him and bitterly denounces his brother for seducing Gertrude. Critics continue to dispute whether the ghost's words mean that Gertrude had an adulterous relationship with Claudius before King Hamlet's death, or whether he is referring to their relationship after his death. While demanding that Hamlet avenge his murder, the ghost orders him not to harm Gertrude.

While Gertrude says relatively little, some of her comments are insightful and to the point. She cuts short a lengthy explanation from the long-winded Polonius by urging him to produce "more matter with less art" (II.ii.95). Later, during the performance by the players, the player queen makes a long and passionate declaration of devotion to her husband; Gertrude observes, "The lady doth protest too much, methinks" (III.ii.230).

Gertrude's most dramatic moments come in the highly emotional "closet scene" (III.iv), which takes place in her private chamber or "closet." Acting on Polonius's advice ("Tell him [Hamlet] his pranks have been too broad [unrestrained] to bear with" [III.iv.2]), the queen calls Hamlet to her chamber, where Polonius is listening behind a curtain. The queen begins by scolding Hamlet for offending Claudius. Hamlet responds by

accusing her of marrying Claudius out of purely sexual desire. Hearing Polonius behind the curtain, Hamlet stabs him through the curtain and kills him, apparently mistaking him for Claudius. He then reveals to Gertrude his belief that Claudius killed his father. Hamlet's tirade against the queen is cut short when the ghost (who is invisible to Gertrude) again appears to Hamlet and reminds him of his mission of revenge. Toward the end of the scene, Gertrude expresses remorse for her behavior. Her lines, however, do not make clear whether she already knew or, indeed, believes that Claudius murdered Hamlet's father, and whether she thinks Hamlet is sane or mad. Stage and film productions of the play have interpreted these questions in many different ways.

Although Gertrude does not subsequently abandon Claudius, neither does she reveal to him Hamlet's suspicions. She dies in the final scene of the play, when she drinks from a cup of poisoned wine prepared by Claudius and intended for Hamlet. In her dying words she tells Hamlet that the wine is poisoned.

Critics generally regard Gertrude as weak willed, highly dependent on Claudius and easily manipulated by him. Some critics, however, take a more positive view of her character, arguing that her pointed remarks reveal a perceptive intelligence.

## Ghost (Character Analysis)

Of the other major characters in *Hamlet*, the Ghost is important because his demand for revenge sets the plot into motion. The apparition's ambiguous role in the drama reflects the general confusion about spirits in Shakespeare's day. Throughout the tragedy, the Ghost is alternately viewed as an illusion, a portent foreshadowing danger to Denmark, a spirit returning from the grave because of a task left undone, a spirit from purgatory sent with divine permission, and a devil who assumes the form of a dead person to lure mortals to doom. While *Hamlet* is chiefly concerned with this last possibility, each of these perspectives are put to the test at some point in the play.

Before the play begins, King Hamlet of Denmark has been found dead. His brother Claudius has become king and has married the widowed queen, Gertrude. Prince Hamlet, grieving the loss of his father and his mother's hasty and incestuous (by Elizabethan standards) remarriage, has descended into a deep melancholy. Moreover, on two consecutive nights the ghost has appeared in armor to palace guards on the battlements of the castle. The two guards have told no one about the ghost except Hamlet's friend Horatio, who has agreed to stand guard with them to see if the ghost appears again.

In I.i, the ghost appears to the two guards and Horatio. Horatio commands the ghost to speak, but it does not. It then reappears and seems about to speak to Horatio, but when a cock crows, signaling daybreak, the ghost vanishes. Horatio resolves to tell Prince Hamlet about the sighting. Hamlet is startled by Horatio's story and decides to watch for the ghost himself.

In I.iv, the ghost reappears in the presence of Hamlet, Horatio and Marcellus and beckons Hamlet to withdraw privately with it. When they are alone in I.v, the ghost tells Hamlet that it is the spirit of Hamlet's father, murdered by Claudius. The ghost denounces Claudius for seducing Gertrude and calls for Hamlet to avenge his death but not to harm Gertrude. The ghost then vanishes. When Horatio and Marcellus appear, Hamlet repeatedly orders them to swear that they will not reveal what they have seen. Hamlet vows vengeance, but later expresses doubt about the ghost's identity, speculating that it could be a devil appearing in his father's form to tempt him to sin. This reaction characterizes his attitude toward the ghost until the play scene (III.ii). Hamlet's own uncertainty is mirrored in the critical debate about the nature of the ghost. Most critics agree that Shakespeare intended audiences to accept the apparition as the ghost of Hamlet's father, but some contend that it may be an illusion or a demon. Some critics argue that the ghost is in fact a devil whose object is to lure Hamlet to his own demise by arousing his passion for vengeance. Another interpretation is that the ghost is a

hallucination seen by only a few characters.

The ghost makes a final appearance in III.iv, shortly after Hamlet stabs Polonius, who has been secretly listening to a confrontation between Hamlet and Gertrude. The ghost reminds Hamlet that he is sworn to vengeance, and as they talk Hamlet expresses his shameful regret that he has not yet acted against Claudius. The ghost then draws Hamlet's attention to Gertrude's "amazement" and urges him to assist her in her moral struggle. Gertrude claims to neither see nor hear the ghost, and this supports the critical interpretation that the apparition Hamlet describes to her is a symptom of his madness. Gertrude's apparent inability to see the ghost has led some critics to suggest that Shakespeare wanted his audience, too, to interpret the ghost as a hallucination. Most critics, however, agree with the view that prevailed during the first three centuries after the writing of *Hamlet*, that the ghost was meant to be taken literally.

## Horatio (Character Analysis)

Horatio is Hamlet's closest friend, a former fellow-student at Wittenberg. Horatio has come to Elsinore from Wittenberg for the funeral of old King Hamlet. He is described by Marcellus as a "scholar" (I.i.42).

Horatio enjoys the absolute trust of those who know him: it is Horatio whom the guards ask to witness the appearance of the ghost, it is Horatio with whom Hamlet trusts his suspicions regarding Claudius, and even Claudius trusts Horatio to look after and further restrain Hamlet after Hamlet attacks Laertes at Ophelia's funeral. In III.ii.54-87 Hamlet professes his faith in Horatio and praises his qualities of judiciousness, patience, and equanimity.

Horatio is initially skeptical about the ghost. He believes it is a "fantasy" (I.i.23) of the watch. After seeing and attempting to communicate with the ghost, Horatio speculates that its appearance might be related to possible impending war with Norway. In speaking to the ghost, Horatio implores it to tell him if he can do anything to help it, or to avoid trouble befalling his country. Noting that the ghost looks like the dead King Hamlet and seemed about to speak when it vanished with the dawn, Horatio resolves to tell Hamlet about the apparition.

Horatio worries that the ghost may lead Hamlet to suicide or madness, so he and Marcellus try unsuccessfully to prevent Hamlet from meeting with the ghost. After Hamlet's private conference with the ghost, Horatio tells Hamlet that he is speaking in "wild and whirling words" (I.v.132-33), and even jokes grimly that some of what Hamlet claims the ghost has told him is common knowledge: "There needs no ghost, my lord, come from the grave / To tell us this" (I.v.125).

Hamlet does not reveal the true substance of the ghost's claims—that he is the ghost of Hamlet's father, murdered by Claudius—to Horatio until later in the play. Hamlet asks Horatio to watch King Claudius during the staging of a play that will recreate a similar murder in order to judge, by the king's responses, whether he seems guilty. He and Hamlet compare notes on the king's behavior afterwards. Horatio is one of the few fixed points in the play: he remains from first to last a loyal friend to Hamlet, trusted by all. He attempts suicide when Hamlet is dying, but Hamlet asks him to remain alive to give a full account of the tragic events at the Danish court.

The least complicated "good" character in the play, Horatio is calm and stoical. He furnishes Hamlet with an anchor, and his allegiance to the prince is so great that he offers to die alongside his friend.

## Laertes (Character Analysis)

Laertes is Polonius's son and Ophelia's brother. He has come to Denmark for King Claudius's coronation. In his first appearance in I.ii, he seeks permission to return to France.

When he appears again in I.iii, Laertes bids his sister Ophelia farewell and warns her about Hamlet. He advises her that Hamlet can't choose a mate for himself alone, but, being the prince, must think of the state. Thus, he cautions Ophelia to protect her virtue. Polonius then enters and advises his son on how to conduct himself while in France. When his father is finished, Laertes leaves for France.

Laertes returns to Denmark after Polonius's death, bursting into the room with a group of followers and addressing Claudius, "O thou vile king" (IV.v.116), and vowing revenge for his father's death. Claudius assures Laertes that he played no role in the death of Polonius and asks him if he is prepared to know the truth, if in his desire for vengeance he will look to both "friend and foe" (IV.v.143). Ophelia then enters, and Laertes realizes that his sister has gone mad. The king then tells Laertes that he will give up the kingdom, his crown and his life if Laertes and his followers find that he was involved in Polonius's death. Later, Claudius explains to Laertes that there was no formal inquiry into Polonius's death due to the queen's love for Hamlet and due to the high regard the people have for the prince. During this scene (IV.vii) a messenger arrives bearing a letter from Hamlet; Laertes and Claudius learn that the prince has returned to Denmark. The king speaks of a plot to kill Hamlet, and Laertes expresses his wish to be a part of it. When Claudius asks Laertes "What would you undertake / To show yourself indeed your father's son / More than in words?" Laertes replies that he would cut Hamlet's throat in the church (IV.vii.124-26). After further discussion, a plan evolves in which Laertes will fight Hamlet with a poisoned rapier; and, as an additional measure, Claudius will offer a cup of poisoned wine to Hamlet, if it appears as though Hamlet might be winning the match.

After Ophelia's funeral, during which Laertes and Hamlet leap into Ophelia's grave, Laertes and Hamlet prepare to duel. In the course of the duel, just before Laertes wounds Hamlet with the poisoned rapier, Laertes says in an aside "And yet it is almost against my conscience" (V.ii.296). After a scuffle the two change rapiers. Laertes is then wounded with the poisoned rapier by Hamlet. At the same moment, the queen, who has drunk from the cup of poisoned wine, falls and warns Hamlet that the drink is poisoned. Laertes then tells Hamlet the truth about the king's layered plots. He asks Hamlet for forgiveness and in turn forgives Hamlet for his own and his father's death.

Unlike Hamlet, Laertes is rash and bold, crashing his way into Elsinore. Laertes is not, however, an admirable character; he actively conspires with Claudius to determine the outcome of his duel with Hamlet. On the other hand, it is at Laertes' behest that he and Hamlet forgive each other before dying.

## Ophelia (Character Analysis)

Ophelia is the sister of Laertes and the daughter of the king's councillor, Polonius. As I.iii opens, Ophelia has apparently confided to her brother that Prince Hamlet has declared his love for her. Laertes, who is saying goodbye to his sister as he leaves for France, warns Ophelia not to take Hamlet's professions of love seriously. Pointing out that the weddings of princes are usually arranged for reasons of state rather than for love, he cautions her to guard her virginity. Ophelia promises to take his words to heart but also urges her brother to follow his own advice and to avoid "the primrose path of dalliance" (I.iii.50). Polonius enters and adds his warnings to those of Laertes. He orders Ophelia not to spend time with Hamlet or even to talk to him. Ophelia promises to obey.

Ophelia next appears in II.i, when she tells Polonius that Hamlet has frightened her by entering her room and behaving in a bizarre manner. Convinced that Ophelia's refusal to speak to Hamlet has caused the prince to

lose his mind, Polonius hurries to Claudius and Gertrude, who have also noted Hamlet's odd behavior and are in the process of instructing Hamlet's old friends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to find out the reason for it. Polonius and Claudius arrange to spy on a meeting between Hamlet and Ophelia so that they can determine if love for Ophelia is really the cause of his apparent madness. This meeting occurs in III.i, and follows Hamlet's "To be or not to be" soliloquy. Ophelia greets Hamlet and tries to return his gifts to her. Hamlet denies having given her anything and subjects her to several vehement and disjointed statements commenting on the falseness of women and questioning the nature of marriage. Hamlet tells Ophelia that he "did love [her] once" (III.i.114). To her response, "Indeed, my lord, you made me believe so" (III.i.115), he answers: "You should not have believ'd me" (III.i.116). Because Hamlet repeatedly charges Ophelia to "Get thee to a nunnery" (III.i.120), with the possible double meaning of "brothel," this scene is often referred to as the "nunnery scene." Although Polonius continues to believe that unrequited love has caused Hamlet's madness, Claudius is not convinced, and resolves to send Hamlet to England.

During the play "The Mousetrap," Hamlet sits next to Ophelia and responds to her attempts at conversation with angry and sexually suggestive remarks. When Ophelia next appears, in IV.v, Hamlet has killed her father and has himself been sent away to England, and Ophelia has gone mad. She comes before the king and queen singing snatches of songs about death, love, and sexual betrayal. She exits briefly, then returns after the arrival of Laertes and distributes various herbs and wildflowers with symbolic meanings. Two scenes later, Gertrude interrupts a meeting between Claudius and Laertes with the news that Ophelia has drowned, an apparent suicide. Blaming Hamlet for the deaths of both his father and his sister, Laertes plots with Claudius to obtain revenge by killing Hamlet.

At the beginning of Act V, two gravediggers discuss the appropriateness of Ophelia being given "Christian burial" even though her death is believed to have been suicide. Hamlet, who has escaped his uncle's plot to have him killed in England and has returned unexpectedly to Denmark, enters with Horatio. Unaware of Ophelia's death, he engages a gravedigger and Horatio in a discussion of mortality. As the funeral procession approaches, Hamlet and Horatio hide. When Laertes shows his grief by leaping into the grave, Hamlet, realizing that the funeral is Ophelia's, follows suit, claiming that his own love for Ophelia was far greater than Laertes's. The two men grapple and have to be separated by the other mourners.

A completely innocent and naïve young woman, Ophelia is easily dominated by her father and lapses just as easily into madness after his death. Ophelia is a pathetic character, abused by circumstances and confused by Hamlet's alternating professions of love and disdain for her.

Ophelia's character represents the ideals of youth and innocence that are ultimately corrupted by the Danish court in *Hamlet*. Her descent into madness begins as the result of the "nunnery scene" (Act III, scene i), where she is manipulated by her father and cruelly abused by Hamlet. At the outset, Ophelia trusts both Hamlet's nobility and Polonius's wisdom, but by the end of the episode her emotions are damaged and she loses faith in both men. Ophelia's insanity and tragic drowning thus illustrate how the Danish court has degenerated to the point that it poisons even the purest form of beauty and innocence.

Ophelia is sometimes seen as an excessively weak character: first, because she obeys her father so unquestioningly, even to the point of helping him to spy on Hamlet; and second, because she loses her mind. Many critics, however, have defended both Shakespeare's choice of making Ophelia the character that she is, and Ophelia's behavior within the play.

## Principal Topics

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.ii.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—infuriated 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.

## 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 "murder" 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?" (1.571). 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.

## 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:

Perhaps he loves you now,  
And no soil nor cautel doth besmirch  
The virtue of his will; but you must fear,  
His greatness being 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.  
(1.3.14-24)

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 filtered 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.

## 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-known 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.

## **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 murder" 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 conscience, 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., 1.136). 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., 1.148), 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., 1.171), 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., 1.40). 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., 1.9). 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 incorporal air do hold discourse?"

(ll.116-118). When she asks what he is looking at, Hamlet blurts out, "On him, on him! Look how pale he glares" (l.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.

## 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 "Frailty, thy name is woman!" (l.146). The woman that Hamlet has in mind is, of course, his mother Gertrude, and her "frailty" 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 "frailty" 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" (l.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. ll.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.



## To Thine Own Self Be True: An Analysis

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 canst 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 "Dankers" 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 "Pantaloone" 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 Pantaloone. 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 too late that his failure to be "true" results in his death and that he has been "false" to another man, Hamlet.

## 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 not 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.

## 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.<sup>1</sup>

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 Voltmand, 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 mischance/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

1. Colin Wilson. *The Occult*. London: Panther, 1979, p. 404.

## 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,

. . . young Fortinbras  
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:

. . . Rightly to be great  
Is not to stir without great argument  
But greatly to find quarrel in a straw  
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 Voltmand 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.<sup>1</sup>

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?<sup>2</sup>

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.<sup>3</sup>

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'.<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup> 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 Voltmand 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.<sup>6</sup>

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'.<sup>7</sup>

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.<sup>8</sup>

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

1. Zeffirelli quoted in 'Franco goes to Elsinore', *The Independent* on Sunday, 14 April 1991.
2. Ibid
3. Cyndi Stivers. 'Hamlet revisited'. *Premiere*, February 1991, vol. 4, no. 6, p. 54.
4. Kenneth Branagh. *'Hamlet' by William Shakespeare: Screenplay and Introduction by Kenneth Branagh; Film Diary by Russell Jackson*. London: Chatto & Windus, 1996, p. viii.
5. Kenneth Branagh. Trailer for *Hamlet* on videotape of *Othello* (USA, 1994)
6. Kenneth Branagh quoted in 'Hamlet in the round', *Eyepiece*. Reading, Berkshire, September, 1996.
7. See footnote 4.
8. Robert F. Willson, Jr. 'Kenneth Branagh's Hamlet or the Revenge of Fortinbras'. *The Shakespeare Newsletter*, Spring 1997, p. 7.

## 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."<sup>1</sup>

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."<sup>2</sup> 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."<sup>3</sup>

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."<sup>4</sup> 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."<sup>5</sup> 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. . . ."<sup>6</sup> 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."<sup>7</sup> 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"<sup>8</sup>, is that they are both capable of reflecting back to their innocence, which has been irretrievably lost:

The time has been, my senses would have cool'd  
To hear a night-shriek, and my fell of hair  
Would at a dismal treatise rouse and stir  
As life were in 't, I have supp'd full with horrors;  
Direness, familiar to my slaughterous thoughts,  
Cannot once start me.  
(*Macbeth*, V, v, 10-15)

#### Notes

1. Louis Auchincloss, *Motiveless Malignity* (Boston, 1969), p. 48.
2. Harold C. Goddard, *The Meaning of Shakespeare* (Chicago, 1962), vol. I, p. 344.
3. Ibid. volume II, p. 111.
4. Helen Gardner, "Hamlet and the Tragedy of Revenge" in Dean, ed., p. 225.
5. Elmer Edgar Stoll, "Source and Motive in Macbeth and Othello" in Dean, ed., p. 318.
6. Ibid.
7. Mark Van Doren, "Macbeth" in Dean, ed., p. 360.
8. Goddard, volume II, p. 110.

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## 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., l.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., l.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., l.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., l.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.

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## 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".<sup>1</sup> 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".<sup>2</sup>

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".<sup>3</sup> 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 loosening 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?"<sup>4</sup> 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".<sup>5</sup> This utterance is followed a little later by: ". . . the gallows is built stronger than the church . . ."<sup>6</sup> and after that: ". . . 'a gravemaker': the houses that he makes last till doomsday".<sup>7</sup> 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'".<sup>8</sup> 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 Caesar, dead and turn'd to clay, Might stop a hole to keep the wind away . . .",<sup>9</sup> 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".<sup>10</sup> 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*".<sup>11</sup> 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.<sup>12</sup>

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

1. C.A. Swineburne, *A Study of Shakespeare*, (NY: AMS Press, Inc., 1965), p.161.
2. W.D. Swott, *Shakespeare's Melancholies*, (London: Mills & Boon, Ltd., 1962), p.106.
3. S. Thorndyke, ed., *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*, (London: REX Library, 1973), p.6.
4. Thorndyke, ed., "Hamlet," p. 876.
5. Thorndyke, ed., "Hamlet," p. 876.
- 6-9. Thorndyke, ed., "Hamlet," p. 876-878.
10. A.L. Birney, *Satiric Catharsis in Shakespeare*, (Berkeley, Ca.: University of California Press, 1973), p.13.
11. S.T. Coleridge, *Lectures on Shakespeare & Milton*, (NY: Dutton, 1960), p.105.
12. G.B. Harrison, "Hamlet," (in *Hamlet, Shakespeare*, Hoy, ed., NY: Norton, 1963), p.248.

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## 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."<sup>1</sup>

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.<sup>2</sup>

Horatio quickly conquers his fear and addresses the spirit. Marcellus and Bernardo 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.<sup>3</sup>

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:

. . . and besides Marcellus' word for it that he is a scholar, we have him citing Plutarch. <sup>4</sup>

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.<sup>5</sup>

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 ever 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.<sup>6</sup>

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."<sup>7</sup>

Passing on from an 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.<sup>8</sup>

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.<sup>9</sup>

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.<sup>10</sup>

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

1. *Prefaces to Shakespeare*, Granville-Barker, Princeton, New Jersey, University Press 1940, p.198.
2. *Ibid.* p.198.
3. *Hamlet*, edited by George Hylands, Oxford University Press, Toronto, 1963. p.65.
4. *Prefaces to Shakespeare*, p.198.
5. *Hamlet*, p. 56.
6. *Shakespearean Tragedy*, A.C. Bradley, Macmillan and Co., London, 1941 p.112.
7. *Shakespearean Tragedy*, p.99.
8. *Hamlet*, p. 63.
9. *Ibid.* p.57.
10. *Ibid.* p.172.

## 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.<sup>1</sup>

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 love 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."<sup>2</sup>

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 heat, fused into thought."<sup>3</sup> 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."<sup>5</sup> 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."<sup>6</sup> 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

1. Maynard Mack, gen. ed. *World Masterpieces*, Vol. I, (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., Inc., 1965) , pp. 1173-1174.
2. Theodore Lidz, *Hamlet's Enemy: Madness and Myth in Hamlet*, (London: Vision Press Ltd, 1976) p. 33
3. Harley Granville-Barker, *Prefaces to Shakespeare*, Vol. I, (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1946), p. 77.
4. Lidz, p. 66.
5. Hardin Craig, ed. *The Complete Works of Shakespeare*, (Glenview, Illinois: Scott, Foresman and Co., 1961), p. 902.
6. Mack, p. 1174.

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## 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 grandly 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.

## 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 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 them 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 apparition 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 adherence 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.

## 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 enmity 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, catharsis 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.

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## 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.

## 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 Grammaticus, 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.<sup>1</sup> 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 Denmark.'"<sup>2</sup> 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*.<sup>3</sup>

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"<sup>4</sup> who, if you ask them will "afford you whole Hamlets, I should say handfuls of tragical speeches."<sup>5</sup> 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."<sup>6</sup>

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."<sup>7</sup>

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.<sup>8</sup>

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."<sup>9</sup>

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*."<sup>10</sup> 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.<sup>11</sup>

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."<sup>12</sup> 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. . ."<sup>13</sup> 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 an 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. . . .<sup>14</sup>

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.<sup>15</sup>

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.<sup>16</sup>

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."<sup>17</sup>

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.<sup>18</sup>

Jones traces the history of the Hamlet legend back to the ancient Iranian legend of Kaikhosrav, and finds "striking cousins"<sup>19</sup> to this legend in the Cirakar in the Mahabharata, the Greek Bellerophon legend, and the Finnish legend of Kullero.<sup>20</sup> 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,"<sup>21</sup> and "the success of a young hero displacing a rival father."<sup>22</sup>

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."<sup>23</sup> 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.<sup>24</sup>

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."<sup>25</sup> 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."<sup>26</sup>

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."<sup>27</sup> 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."<sup>28</sup>

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,

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.<sup>29</sup>

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."<sup>30</sup>) 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."<sup>31</sup> 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.<sup>32</sup>

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."<sup>33</sup>

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."<sup>34</sup> 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."<sup>35</sup>

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."<sup>36</sup>

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"<sup>37</sup> 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."<sup>38</sup> 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 Grammaticus; 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.<sup>39</sup>

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"<sup>40</sup> 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"<sup>41</sup> 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.<sup>42</sup>

Hence we have a Catholic ghost and a "Protestant Prince who fears that this ghost may be a devil in disguise."<sup>43</sup> 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.<sup>44</sup>

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."<sup>45</sup> 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.<sup>46</sup>

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 pat, now he is praying  
And now I'll do 't. And so he goes to Heaven,  
And so I am revenged. That would be scanned:  
A villain kills my father, and for that  
I, his sole son, do this same villain send  
To Heaven.<sup>47</sup>

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. <sup>48</sup>

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."<sup>49</sup> 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,"<sup>50</sup> 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.<sup>51</sup>

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."<sup>52</sup>

#### Endnotes

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9. Giorgio de Santillana and Hertha von Dechend, *Hamlet's Mill*. (Boston, Gambit, 1969), p. 25.
10. I.J. Semper, *Hamlet Without Tears*. (Dubuque, Iowa: The Loras College Press, 1946), pp. 8-9.
11. de Santillana, p. 7
12. Ernest Jones, *Hamlet and Oedipus*. (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company, 1949), p. 18.
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14. Jones, p. 267.
15. Jones, p. 40.
16. Harrison, p. 603.
17. *Hamlet*, I, iv, 40-42.

18. Jones, p. 60.
19. Jones, p. 147.
20. Ibid.
21. Ibid.
22. Jones, p. 148.
23. Jones, p. 152.
24. Jones, p. 156.
25. Jones, p. 160.
26. Ibid.
27. *Hamlet*, III, iii, 36-38.
28. *Hamlet*, III, ii, 411-414.
29. *Hamlet*, I, v, 9-13.
30. *Hamlet*, IV, v, 76-77.
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.
37. Semper, p. 17.
38. Ibid.
39. Ibid.
40. *Hamlet*, I, v, 84-85.
41. *Hamlet*, I, iv, 41.
42. Eleanor Prosser, *Hamlet and Revenge*, (Stanford, California: Stanford Univ. Press, 1967), p. 107.
43. Semper, p. 30.



44. See F.W. Moorman, "Shakespeare's Ghosts," *Modern Language Review*, Vol. I, pp. 192-201.
45. *Hamlet*, III, i, 65-68.
46. *Hamlet*, III, i, 83-88.
47. *Hamlet*, III, iii, 73-95.
48. *Hamlet*, IV, iii, 20-26.
49. John Dover Wilson, *What Happens in Hamlet*. (London: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1970), p. 28.
50. Marchette Chute, *Shakespeare of London*. (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1949), p. 228.
51. *Ibid.*
52. Chute, p. 229.

## Selected Quotes

### **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 enamorado. 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 get 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.

# 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 which 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 'destitute 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.

## Hamlet and Revenge

(From *Hamlet and Revenge* by Eleanor Prosser. ©1971 Stanford University Press. Reprinted by permission of the publisher)

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 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.

## 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, Voltmand 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 spring" [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 ponders, of "Bestial oblivion, or some craven scruple 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 gravemaker. 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 suffring 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 "splenitive 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 mummy 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, frighting 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)

Source: David Bevington, in an introduction to *Twentieth Century Interpretations of Hamlet: A Collection of Critical Essays*, edited by David Bevington, Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1968, pp. 1-12.

### **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?" [I. 13] Horatio's of the ghost, "What art thou . . . ?" [I. 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 sledged 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 murder" [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 bung hole; 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)

Source: Maynard Mack, "The World of Hamlet," in *The Yale Review*, Vol. XLI, No. 4, June, 1952, pp. 502-23.

## 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 Polonius, 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 having 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 his 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]. Fortinbras' 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*, Vol. 9, No. 4, Summer, 1965, pp. 132-45.

### **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 Wilhelm 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 deceyt, 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 unflinching 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 melancholiacs: "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, climaxed 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)

Robert R. Reed Jr., "Hamlet, the Pseudo-Procrastinator," in *Shakespeare Quarterly*, Vol. IX, No. 2, Spring, 1958, pp. 177-86.

## 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 deploring 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:

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]

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:

Nor sense to ecstasy was ever so thrall'd  
But it reserved some quantity of choice  
To serve in such a difference  
[III. iv. 74-6]

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)

Rene Girard, "Hamlet's Dull Revenge," in *Stanford Literature Review*, Vol. 1, No. 2, Fall, 1984, pp. 159-200.

## 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 afflictions 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 but 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 irrepressible 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 cellage, 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,

carion, 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 commonplaces 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)

Source: Oscar James Campbell, "What Is the Matter with Hamlet?" in *The Yale Review*, Vol. XXXII, No. 2, Winter, 1943, pp. 309-22.

### **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 veiled 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 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:

*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 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. 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.  
[V. i. 254-58]

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.  
[V. ii. 219-24]

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)

Source: Arthur Kirsch, "Hamlet's Grief," in *ELH*, Vol. 48, No. 1, Spring, 1981, pp. 17-36.

## 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 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 "imagination 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:

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]

*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:

'Tis now the very witching time of night,  
 When churchyards yawn, and hell itself breathes out  
 Contagion to this world.  
 [III. ii. 388-90]

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,  
Infects 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?  
[V. ii. 68-70]

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 concourss 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)

Source: Richard D. Altick, "'Hamlet' and the Odor of Mortality," in *Shakespeare Quarterly*, Vol. V, No. 2, Spring, 1954, 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:



It will but skin and film the ulcerous place,  
Whiles rank corruption, mining all within,  
Infects unseen.  
[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

Contagious blastments are most imminent.  
[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—

the imposthume of much wealth and peace  
That inward breaks, and shows no cause without  
Why the man dies.  
[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"—

Doth all the noble substance of a doubt.  
[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

imaginations 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 brazened 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 *grapple* 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)

Source: Kenneth Muir, "Imagery and Symbolism in 'Hamlet,'" in *Etudes Anglaises*, Vol. XVII, No. 4, October-December, 1964, pp. 352-63.

## 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 Lidz 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 effected 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 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, [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, and 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)

Source: George Detmold, "Hamlet's 'All but Blunted Purpose'," in *The Shakespeare Association Bulletin*, Vol. XXIV, No. 1, January, 1949, pp. 23-36.

### **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 to be."

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)

Source: Ernest Jones, "The Psycho-Analytical Solution," in his *Hamlet and Oedipus*, 1949. Reprint by Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1954, pp. 51-79.

### **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 revolted detail upon "The bloated 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, decreeing him 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 pro-foundest 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 fatter, 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—on 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 purged 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)

Edgar Johnson, "The Dilemma of Hamlet (William Shakespeare: 'Hamlet')," in *Great Moral Dilemmas in Literature, Past and Present*, edited by R. M. MacIver, 1956. Reprint by Cooper Square Publishers, Inc., 1964, pp. 99-111.

## 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 adultress. 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 outweighs 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)

Kenneth Muir, in his *Shakespeare: Hamlet*, Barron's Educational Series, Inc., 1963, 61 p.

## 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

rebouncing 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 kindness. 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 fitting 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 bruit 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:

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.  
[I. v. 106-09]

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 *Phyala 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.

[IV. v. 81-2]

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 utter 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.

## Gertrude

### Carolyn Heilbrun

[Heilbrun 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 hastening 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)

Source: Carolyn Heilbrun, "The Character of Hamlet's Mother," In *Shakespeare Quarterly*, Vol. VII, No. 2, Spring, 1957, 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,

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

Thou know'st 'tis common. All that lives must die,  
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

If it be,  
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:

Let not thy mother lose her prayers, Hamlet.  
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 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.  
[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,



Shows itself pure. 'A weeps for what is done.  
[IV. i. 24-7]

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 concemings 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.  
[III. iv. 180-96]

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—

[IV. v. 22, 27, 34]

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 swoonds 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)

Baldwin Maxwell "Hamlet's Mother," in *Shakespeare 400: Essays by American Scholars on the Anniversary of the Poet's Birth*, edited by James G. McManaway, Holt Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1964, pp. 235-46.

## 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 enviously 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 impulses, 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 fantasize 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)

Source: Theodore Lidz, in his *Hamlet's Enemy: Madness and Myth in "Hamlet,"* 1975. Reprint by International Universities Press, Inc., 1990. 258 p.

### **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 more 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 eavesdroppers 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.

## 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?

## **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 indirection 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".
- 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.

## 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 cholera, 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.

## 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*. Neil Hartley and Martin Rashonoff, 1969. Motion picture version of Shakespeare's tragedy, featuring Nicol Williamson, Anthony Hopkins, and Marianne Faithful. Directed by Tony Richardson. Distributed by RCA/Columbia Home Video. 114 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.
- *Hamlet*. Warner Brothers, 1990. Film version of Shakespeare's tragedy directed by Franco Zeffirelli and starring Mel Gibson, Glenn Close, Alan Bates, Ian Holm, Helena Bonham-Carter, and Paul Scofield. Distributed by Warner Brothers Home Video, Inc. 135 minutes.

## FAQs

### Why does Shakespeare choose Denmark as the setting for *Hamlet*?

While references are made in *Hamlet* to several other lands, including France, Germany, Norway, Poland, and England itself, all of the action in the play occurs in and around Elsinore Castle in Denmark. In Shakespeare's day (and to this day), there was (and is) an Elsinore in Denmark and a castle in Elsinore, the Kronberg Castle, which houses a Shakespeare museum. Some scholars have speculated that Shakespeare himself had visited Elsinore before he wrote *Hamlet*, either in his pre-theater youth or as a member of a traveling troupe of actors. The text of the play, however, contains several false statements about Denmark, such as the statements that Denmark has a "flat" terrain and is connected directly by land to Norway, and that Elsinore has no cliffs. Leaving the issue of whether the playwright actually visited Denmark aside, like his fellow Elizabethans, Shakespeare was certainly aware of the Danes, for in the early seventeenth century, Denmark was a commercial rival to England in the lucrative Baltic trade. That being so, Shakespeare's audiences appreciated the notion that something was "rotten" in Denmark, as well as the disparaging remarks about the Danes and their disposition toward drunken consumption of Rhine wine.

### What is the mood at the opening of *Hamlet*?

In the first scene of *Hamlet*, we are told that a ghost of some sort may have been about on the walls of Elsinore Castle. It is not the terror of supernatural menace that serves as the mood at the play's start; *Hamlet* is not a ghost or horror story. The initial exchange between Barnardo and Francisco, starting with the former's "Who's there?" and the latter's counter-question, "Nay, answer me, stand and unfold thyself," establishes the dominant mood and one of the principal thematic strands of the play, uncertainty. In most of Shakespeare's plays, the Bard discloses the dramatic situation with remarkable economy. In *Hamlet*, by contrast, we do not know what the conflict at hand is or whether there is, in fact, any conflict whatsoever. Nearly two hundred lines are spoken before reference is made to young Hamlet. We do not encounter the Danish prince until the play's second scene and have no idea about why he is so sullen until the end of that scene. Uncertainty, as opposed to threat, is the salient feature of the play's atmosphere from the very start, and it is with doubt and uncertainty that Hamlet grapples until the play's conclusion.

### Does Hamlet really hate his mother?

Plainly, Hamlet is disturbed by Gertrude's welcoming Claudius into her "incestuous sheets," and he is even more upset when he learns that his mother was having an affair with his uncle before his father, ur-Hamlet, is murdered. Hamlet berates his mother in Act III, scene iv, but no worse than he maligns Polonius and inexplicably denigrates Ophelia. Although the Ghost explicitly instructs Hamlet not to seek revenge upon Gertrude, but to "leave her to heaven" instead, we do not gain the sense that Hamlet wants to kill his mother. His sole focus is on exacting vengeance against his usurping uncle. Hamlet does not think of Gertrude as actively "evil," but, instead, as passive and, above all, "weak." Thus, he declares, "Frailty, thy name is woman" (I.ii.146). As this statement suggests, Hamlet attributes his mother's weakness to her gender rather than her particular person. Although there is no reconciliation between Gertrude and her son, when she realizes that the dueling swords are tipped with poison, the Queen does try to warn Hamlet. In the end, Hamlet is repelled by Gertrude's weakness, but he does not hate her in the same way that he detests his uncle.

## Who is Yorick?

One of the most famous names in English drama belongs to a character who never appears on stage and is, in fact, long dead before the play's action begins. In the graveyard scene of Act V, Hamlet comes across a skull and acknowledges it with the words, "Alas, poor Yorick! I knew him Horatio: / A fellow of infinite jest" (V.i.184). In short order, Hamlet tells us that Yorick was once the court fool (it is interesting to note that no one has replaced him in this part). Hamlet harbors a sentimental affection for the deceased jester, who once gave him piggyback rides and delighted the boy with his gibes, gambols, and songs. Yorick's demise provides an opportunity for Hamlet to again contemplate human mortality. Yet at the same time, it is a reminder that all of life is not glum, that there was a happier time in even the dour Hamlet's life. Perhaps most important, this reminder of loss and Hamlet's willingness to face it is emblematic of his acceptance of loss as both part of life and as the end of life.

## What is Osric's function?

In Act V, scene ii, Shakespeare introduces a minor character into *Hamlet* in the person of Osric. Osric's instrumental function in the play is extremely limited; he brings word to Hamlet that the King has requested the prince to engage in fencing match with Laertes. This transfer of information could have been handled by an anonymous messenger and need not have been dramatized at all. Because the narrative part that Osric performs is so small and his appearance on stage so arbitrary, we are given to wonder why Shakespeare wrote the character into the play. Osric's character is distinctive. He is a foppish courtier, who is dressed fashionably and given to excessive courtesies, calling Hamlet "My lord," even as the Danish prince insults him to his face, calling him a "waterfly." Osric's pretentiousness is emblematic of the false façade of well-being that envelops the Danish court under a king who has murdered his own brother, wed his sister-in-law, and concealed his crimes from the people. He is also a foil to the depiction of Yorick through Hamlet's fond memories in the first scene of Act V; the court jester is a genuine fool and Osric is a disingenuous fool. Osric also provides Hamlet with an opportunity for comic relief following the death of Ophelia and his ruminations in the graveyard scene. In a sense, by puncturing Osric's false front, Hamlet renounces his own prior disposition toward play-acting.

## Why is Hamlet given a military funeral?

At the end of the play, with Hamlet's corpse on stage, the character of Fortinbras, the heroic young prince of Norway, appears for the first time. He instructs his men, "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...." (V.ii.395-98). Hamlet is given a full state funeral with "soldier's music" and "rites of war" customarily reserved for military heroes. The problem, of course, is that Hamlet is not a military hero, but only "like" a soldier. By bringing Fortinbras into the play at the eleventh hour, Shakespeare highlights Hamlet's redemption through action. Fortinbras has been previously mentioned in Act I, scene ii, and even at this early juncture, there is an opposition implied between the active Norwegian regent and a Danish prince unable to act. Hamlet himself finds meaning in the parallel between himself and Fortinbras in Act IV, scene iv, when the sight of the young Norwegian general's troops on the march informs Hamlet of his paralysis. That the active Fortinbras praises Hamlet and takes him as a peer underscores the Danish prince's emergence into a man who can act in the face of uncertainty. Yet at the same time, Hamlet persuades Horatio to remain alive so that he can tell his friend's story and mend Hamlet's "wounded name." A military funeral does not accurately reflect Hamlet's end. Instead, it reminds us of the complexity of the events at hand and of Hamlet himself, both of which are so complicated that no conventional symbolic ceremony can mark their conclusion.

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